



CAHPS reference guide

Winning at CAHPS—easy tips to enhance patient experience and improve loyalty





The Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS) survey asks patients about their experiences with their healthcare, from their plan to their doctors, specialists, and more.

This survey is the national standard for measuring and reporting the experiences of consumers with their healthcare. CAHPS is a mandated regulatory and accreditation survey sent to a randomly selected number of members.

Providers and their team affect patient responses to CAHPS survey questions. This document lists some key CAHPS survey questions with suggestions for you to help your patient have the best healthcare experience.

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The CAHPS Survey:

- Evaluates enrollee satisfaction with accessing and receiving care, tests, and treatment
- Assesses patient experience with health plans and the healthcare they receive during the plan year
- Includes questions on plan service, claims processing, communications, and customer service
- Used by Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurers

Clinician & Group CAHPS Survey:

- Assesses patient experience with providers and staff
- Covers topics like communication, care coordination, access, and office environment
- Focuses on interactions with doctors, nurses, front desk staff, etc.
- Is used by medical practices, clinics, hospitals, ACOs, etc.
- Evaluates patient perceptions of care quality and service

In summary, the CAHPS survey looks at the consumer perspective of accessing and receiving care while the Clinician & Group Survey examines clinical care delivery experiences with providers and their teams. Both provide important patient feedback to drive improvements in their respective areas.

CAHPS measures and easy tips for success

Topic: Getting needed care

Question: In the last six months:

- How often did you get an appointment to see a specialist as soon as you needed?
- How often was it easy to get the care, tests, or treatment you needed?

Tips for success:

- Review with patients what role they play in securing care, tests, or treatment (e.g., scheduling with specialists, timely appointments).
- Set realistic expectations around how long it could take to schedule an appointment with the specialist if the appointment is not urgent.
- If applicable, advise your patient on how you can help secure an appointment sooner if your clinic has an established relationship with a specialist.
- Help the patient understand why you're recommending certain types of care, tests, or treatments, especially if the patient requested or asked about other types.

Note: PacificSource doesn't require a referral to see a specialist.



Topic: Getting appointments and care quickly

Questions: In the last six months:

- How often did you get an appointment at a doctor's office or clinic as soon as you needed?
- When you needed care right away, how often did you get it?
- How often did you see the person you came to see within 15 minutes of your appointment time?

Tips for success:

- Apologize, even if it's not your fault and there's nothing you can do. Listening compassionately and apologizing sincerely can help your patient feel seen and heard.
- Patients are more tolerant of appointment delays if they know the reasons for the delay, like when the provider is behind schedule.
- Front office staff should update patients often and explain the cause for the schedule delay.
 - Offer reasonable expectations of when the patient will be seen, and give the patient the option to reschedule.
 - Consider creating visible tools to help patients understand delays, such as a white board or digital screen at check-in with each provider's status (on-time, delayed 15 minutes, etc.).
 - Advocate for your patient and ask if they have transportation available for their appointment.
- Consider implementing same-day scheduling or:
 - Leaving a few appointment slots open each day for urgent visits, including post-inpatient discharge visits.
 - Offering appointments with a nurse practitioner or physician's assistant to patients who want to be seen on short notice.
 - Offering online appointments to make it convenient for patients to connect with the practice.
 - Asking patients to make routine checkups and follow-up appointments in advance.

Topic: Overall rating of health care quality

Question: Between 0 and 10, where 0 is the worst health care possible and 10 is the best health care possible, what number would you use to rate all your health care in the last six months?

Tips for success:

- Listen attentively to patients and encourage their questions. Don't appear rushed or distracted.
- Ensure exam rooms and equipment are clean, comfortable, and updated.
- Thank patients for choosing your practice.
- Survey your patients and ask how you can improve their health care experience.
- Create a patient council for regular and ongoing feedback.

Topic: Care coordination

Questions: In the last six months:

- How often did your personal doctor seem informed and up to date about the care you got from specialists?
- How often did you and your personal doctor talk about the prescription drugs you were taking?
- When your personal doctor ordered a blood test, x-ray or other test for you, how often did:
 - someone from your personal doctor’s office follow up to give you those results?
 - you get results as soon as you needed them?
- When you visited your personal doctor for a scheduled appointment, how often did he or she have your medical records or other information about your care?
- Did you get the help you needed from your personal doctor’s office to manage your care among these different providers and services?

Tips for success:

- **Ask your patients if they saw another provider since their last visit.** If you know patients received specialty care, discuss their visit and treatment plan, including new prescriptions.
- New and established patients without an appointment in the last year should be encouraged to schedule their annual wellness visit and a physical. This will ensure annual preventive exams are scheduled and care is coordinated on behalf of the patient.
- Before walking in the exam room, review the reason for the visit and determine if you need to follow up on any health issues or concerns from previous visits.
- Implement a system in your office to ensure timely notifications of test results; ask patients how they would prefer to receive test results and communicate clearly with patients on when they’ll receive test results.
- Complete a medication reconciliation at every visit.
- Utilize or implement a patient portal to share test results and consider automatically releasing the results once they’re reviewed by the provider.

Topic: How well doctors communicate

Questions: In the last six months:

- Was medical information explained to you in a way you could understand?
- Did your doctor spend enough time with you?
- In the last six months, how often did your doctor:
 - explain things in a way that was easy to understand?
 - listen carefully to you?
 - show respect for what you had to say?
 - spend enough time with you?

Tips for success:

- Sit down during patient encounters to appear engaged and eliminate physical barriers. Maintain eye contact to show interest in what patient is saying.
- Encourage patients to elaborate or explain further if they say something vague or confusing. Use open-ended questions.
- Actively listen to the patient. Repeat back what you heard in your own words to demonstrate you understand.
- Clearly explain diagnosis, treatment options, medication directions, and follow-up steps at the end of the visit. Confirm the patient understands.
- Health literacy techniques, such as not using medical jargon and having the patient (or their caregiver) repeat back their plan-of care instructions in their own words, can break down communication barriers. Learn more about health literacy at: [AHRQ.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/tool5.html](https://www.hhrq.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/tool5.html).

Improve patient communication and increase your cultural competence—take our training course on Absorb.

Register now at PacSrc.co/cultural-course.

Topic: Cultural competence

Cultural competence in healthcare reflects the ability of providers and staff to deliver care that is respectful and responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of diverse patient populations. It involves:

- Understanding how a patient’s culture shapes their health beliefs, behaviors, and needs
- Adapting communication styles and care delivery to align with the patient’s cultural preferences
- Accommodating diverse cultural or religious beliefs regarding treatment, family involvement, modesty, diet, end-of-life care, etc.
- Utilizing interpreter services as required for effective patient-provider communication
- Providing educational materials in languages representative of the patient community
- Maintaining a respectful and welcoming environment through policies, signage, décor, artwork
- Collecting race, ethnicity, language and other socio-demographic data to understand community needs
- Recruiting and retaining a culturally diverse staff at all levels
- Ongoing training of staff on cultural competence

By exhibiting cultural competence, providers can help build patient trust and engagement, enhance adherence to treatment plans, and create positive health outcomes and experiences for diverse populations. It is an essential component of patient-centered care and high quality service delivery.

Question: In the last six months, when you needed an interpreter at your doctor’s office or clinic, how often did you get one?

Tips for success:

- Understand language preference and interpretation needs in advance of appointments to ensure resources are available.
- Verify proper tools and resources are readily available in the exam room during each patient’s visit.

Studies have shown that 40–80% of the medical information patients are told during office visits is forgotten immediately, and nearly half of the information retained is incorrect.

Topic: Health equity

Health equity means reducing and eliminating disparities in health and its determinants that adversely affect excluded or marginalized groups.

By being aware of bias, adjusting care delivery, and addressing barriers that perpetuate inequities, providers can enhance access, experience, and outcomes for under-served populations. Health equity benefits all patients and communities.

Question: In the last 6 months, did anyone from a clinic, emergency room, or doctor’s office treat you in an unfair or insensitive way?

Tips for success:

- Take time to understand the patient's full context—their family, neighborhood, support systems, challenges, strengths, etc. Look at the whole person. Avoid making assumptions based on race, ethnicity, gender, or appearance.
- Use visual aids, teach back, reading-level-appropriate materials to confirm understanding.
- Note social determinants like education, income, and environment. Consider impacts.
- Connect patients to resources for food, housing, transportation, medications, and other nonmedical needs impacting health.
- Make scheduling, paperwork, forms, resources, etc. accessible for those with language barriers, disabilities, or limited literacy.
- Accommodate language translation needs promptly and document preferred language.
- Advocate for policies and programs to address health disparities and access barriers impacting at-risk populations.
- Collaborate with community health workers who can liaise with and build trust among underserved groups.

Topic: Getting prescription drugs

Questions: In the last six months, how often was it easy to use your prescription drug plan to:

- fill a prescription by mail?
- fill a prescription at your local pharmacy?
- get the medicines your doctor prescribed?

Tips for success:

- Consider these factors: drug availability and affordability, timely prescribing, and up-to-date patient pharmacy choice. This results in patients getting the drugs they need.
- Check the formulary before prescribing medications likely to require authorization or that may have increased costs to patients' specialty or other brand name drugs.
- Check out our Medicare drug search tool at [Medicare.PacificSource.com/Search/Drug](https://www.Medicare.PacificSource.com/Search/Drug). Questions? Call us and speak to a person at **888-863-3637**, TTY:711. We accept all relay calls.
- Patients can have their prescriptions mailed to their home via our preferred mail-order pharmacy, CVS Caremark Mail-Order Services. Register online at [Caremark.com](https://www.Caremark.com) or call 866-362-4009.



Topic: Rate your personal doctor and specialist

Question: Using any number from 0 to 10, where 0 is the worst personal doctor possible and 10 is the best personal doctor possible, what number would you use to rate your personal doctor?

Tips for success:

- Actively listen without distractions or interruptions
- Make eye contact
- Encourage questions using Ask Me 3:
 - What is my main problem?
 - What do I need to do about it?
 - Why is it important?

Note: Learn more about Ask Me 3 at: IHI.org/resources/tools/ask-me-3-good-questions-your-good-health

- Teach-back method
- Use plain, nonmedical language.
- Ask patient to explain back key information. Use open-ended questions.
- Clarify details and re-explain if patient is unclear or incorrect.
- Document patient's understanding.
 - Schedule needed follow-up and coordinate care
 - Conduct post-visit phone call to check understanding

Topic: Annual flu shots

Question: Have you had a flu shot since July 1 of last year?

Tips for success:

- Promote flu shots through your website, patient portal, and telephone greeting.
- Promote ease of use/access through the patient's pharmacy.
- Administer the shot as soon as it is available each fall.
- Offer multiple options for patients to get their shot (walk-in appointments, flu shot clinics, flu shots at every appointment type, if the patient is eligible).
- Promote motivational interviewing for vaccine hesitancy.

Training opportunity: View "A Motivational Interviewing Approach to Vaccine Hesitancy" training on Absorb, the PacificSource learning platform (no CME available) at PacificSource.myabsorb.com?KeyName=VaccineHesitancy, enrollment key name: VaccineHesitancy.

Questions

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Resources

Training courses: PacificSource.MyAbsorb.com

Health literacy training: Using the Teach-Back Method: AHRQ.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/tool5.html

Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Ask Me 3[®] technique: IHI.org/resources/tools/ask-me-3-good-questions-your-good-health

PacificSource preferred pharmacy, CVS Caremark: Caremark.com

PacificSource Medicare drug search tool: Medicare.PacificSource.com/Search/Drug