

Healthier Aging: Reaching and Teaching Older Adults

Motivation and readiness to learn set the stage for teaching patients of all ages. Explain to your patient why the information you’re teaching is important to him or her and how they’ll benefit from the new knowledge or skill. Then use familiar, reliable sources to give them information. For instance, you might give them brochures from the American Heart Association or the American Lung Association.

An older adult learns from experience and likes to relate new tasks to familiar activities. Because each person comes to a teaching-learning session with something in mind that they wish to take home from it, ask questions or gather data ahead of time so that you can appeal to your patient’s sense of what’s most relevant. Find out what he or she wants to know and begin there.

Many older adults enjoy learning with others, so offer group learning sessions if appropriate and practical. This strategy also provides socialization and gives your patient the opportunity to share ideas and information with her peers.

To accommodate functional and physical changes, make your teaching sessions shorter than an hour because patients may be uncomfortable sitting for too long. Eliminate distractions by keeping the environment quiet. Turn off the TV or radio and close the door or pull the curtain.

HELP PATIENTS SEE CLEARLY

If your patient normally uses glasses, make sure that he or she wears them and that they’re clean before you start a teaching session. During the session, make adaptations to accommodate vision changes that often accompany aging. Here are a few examples:

- Lens accommodation decreases, so older patients require more light to see and their eyes take longer to adjust to a change in light.
- Cataracts are common in the elderly. Your patient may have cataracts that cloud her lens, or she may have other visual changes that should be considered. To avoid glare, don’t stand in front of a window or mirror when you’re teaching. Draw the blinds if the sunlight seems to be too bright for your patient.
- Peripheral vision decreases with age. When planning a teaching session, keep the materials in front of patients so they stay in their main field of vision.

SPEAKING UP

Hearing loss is common in older adults, and their ability to hear high-frequency pitches is usually lost first. Speak slowly, naturally, and clearly. If a patient wears a hearing aid, make sure that it’s turned on. Ask if they can hear you before you start.

Without knowing it, some older adults learn to rely on lip-reading to fill in what they can’t hear. So be sure to face your patient when talking to them so they can see your lips. Don’t talk to patients from another room or with your back turned to them. The teaching you provide may enhance their health—and their life in general.

SELECTED REFERENCES


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