

Messaging for Trust in Health Communication

This brief is the first in a series created to help health workers communicate about evidence-based, personally appropriate health decisions.¹

As public health, clinical and research practitioners and communicators, our work requires us to disseminate accurate information to help people with diverse backgrounds make evidence-based health and safety decisions. However, the technologies that help us communicate also spread unreliable or false information. The steps below will help you convey credible health-related information to patients, peers and community leaders who are bombarded with confusing or conflicting messages. Your specific words may vary depending on each situation and audience, but these core principles always apply.



Step 1: Understand Your Audience and Yourself

- Affirm your trust in science and commitment to serving patients, consumers and the public. Knowing your own values and purpose is important as a starting point for effective communication.
- Know your audience. Listen before speaking. Who do they trust, what do they know, and which ideas and values resonate with them? Enter conversations with genuine curiosity. Never assume that you know what they know or need to hear.
- Demonstrate empathy, find common ground, and use active listening techniques to confirm mutual understanding of key facts, details or actions.
- Open dialogues using phrases like, “Let’s think about what’s best for you” so that you establish a collaborative relationship and discover shared values or goals.



Step 2: Determine Your Single Overriding Communications Objective

Every health topic has many important elements, but crafting an effective message requires focusing on one clear, concise point. Start by identifying *exactly* what you want people to do after they hear your message.

Then, write one sentence that conveys this to your audience, including how the action you advocate addresses their health, personal goals and concerns. After this step, refine your wording so that the message is succinct, accessible and clear to people in your target audience.

Examples:

“The flu vaccine lowers your risk of hospitalization or death after catching the flu.”

“Vaccines help prevent infections that can make kids sick and sometimes die.”

“Serving a few apple slices instead of ice cream is a delicious way to cut calories and boost nutrition.”

¹ This work developed by the Coalition for Trust in Health & Science, the Duke/RTI Initiative and the Council for Quality Health Communication.



Step 3: Support Your Message With Specific Facts

Use evidence from research to craft supporting points. However, only include details essential to your audience's understanding of your key message. Omit anything that may be ambiguous or misunderstood. Don't use medical or other jargon.

Use specific data sparingly. Cramming data into messages makes them less likely to work. Effective scientific communication requires a balance between simplicity and the nuances of current scientific knowledge. For some audiences, more data may only make your message more confusing.

Choose no more than three supporting points based on what is most relevant to your target audience's needs, values and beliefs. Accuracy always, but precision only when necessary. Rounding, generalization and analogies are useful tools to make complex concepts accessible.

Use language your audience understands and believes.

Here are a few examples of supporting points for the sample messages above:

- Vaccines boost the body's natural defense against infection and severe illness.
- Flu vaccine side effects vary from person to person and are overwhelmingly mild.
- Fresh fruit tastes good and has vitamins and fiber that are good for your gut.
- Ice cream has a lot of saturated fat, which increases risk for heart disease and other health problems.



Step 4: Use Your Key Messages to Frame Responses

Your key messages are the foundation of every answer to questions.

- Know how to bridge from any question to a key message. If you know the answer, be direct. If not, redirect to a key message using phrases like "What's important is..." or "We don't know that but what we know is..." Never speculate, and repeat key messages as needed.
- Use verbal cues to flag your main point. Reinforce your message with phrases such as: "The most important thing to remember is..." or "What's interesting is..."
- Show that you are listening. Ask questions of your audience. Find out what's on their mind.

Find out more

We hope you don't stop here! Send your questions and suggestions to us at info@qualityhealthcommunication.org.

Other sources on developing trustworthy health and science messages include:

[The Practical Playbook to Address Health Misinformation](#) from The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security

[Infodemiology.com](https://infodemiology.com)

[The Public Health Communications Collaborative](#)

[The News Literacy Project](#)

[Tackling Misinformation | Public Relations Society of America](#)

[Checklist for global health communication strategies in response to COVID-19](#)

[The Communications Golden Hour: The Essential Guide to Public Information When Every Minute Counts](#) by Doug Levy (Public Safety Press, 2024.)