

## **Question Your Doctor**

### **AARP Bulletin**

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Have you ever left the doctor's office confused? Half of the adults in the United States have trouble understanding what their doctor tells them – and what to do next.

Many people who deal just fine with other facets of their lives can be flummoxed by the complexities of health care. This lack of "health literacy" disproportionately affects older people, minorities and those with low income and less education, according to an Institute of Medicine report.

Good communication between doctors and patients is critical to improving health care, said Christopher Queram, president and CEO of the Wisconsin Collaborative for Healthcare Quality, which collects data from health providers and shares it with the public.

"We're trying to create an equal partnership between patients and caregivers," he said.

Last year, Queram's group joined eight organizations in an experiment called "Ask Me 3" to coach patients to regularly ask three simple questions of their doctor:

1. What is my problem?
2. What do I need to do?
3. Why is it important for me to do this?

The pilot ran in health clinics in five communities: Milwaukee, Racine, Wausau, Beloit and Marshfield. The clinics displayed brochures and posters describing Ask Me 3, clinic doctors and staff were coached on the project, and a four-minute DVD played in waiting rooms.

The project found that patients are reluctant to ask questions of physicians. Researchers asked patients how they could feel more comfortable speaking up with their doctors; some felt it was too stressful to question the doctors and others didn't want to look stupid. But people found Ask Me 3 easy to use and understand.

The three questions may seem pretty basic, but Queram said doctors have tight schedules and "have very little time to spend with patients – to listen to them, to draw them into a discussion, to provide them with the information they need to make good decisions." One doctor in the pilot even changed the structure of his office visits to incorporate the three questions in his conversations with patients.

Good communication matters to patients.

Ask Sandy Skokes, who was so put off by a series of mishaps during her last visit to the medical practice she used for 16 years that she hasn't been back. A cancer survivor, she is relying on a walk-in clinic instead for basic health care. The doctor in her old practice "is my primary care physician in name only," said Stokes, 62, a retired teacher educator at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

"I have not gone back to see her," she said.

Ask Me 3 is part of a larger \$300 million project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation covering 242 counties in 13 states.

The project, called Aligning Forces for Quality, seeks to help doctors and nurses improve quality of care; publicize more data about how doctors are performing; make sure everyone gets the same high quality of care regardless of race or ethnicity; and get patients more involved in their own health care.

Lisa Lamkins, advocacy director for AARP Wisconsin, said the end result is likely to be better, and less expensive, health care.

"Consumers should be active participants in their own health care," Lamkins said. A patient who understands the problem and the options is a patient who can help in the decision making, she said.

For details on Ask Me 3, go to [www.npsf.org/askme3](http://www.npsf.org/askme3).

For more information on health care quality, check out the WCHQ database at [www.wchq.org/reporting](http://www.wchq.org/reporting).

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