


Asking questions

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To be aware of the importance of asking questions about a health concern
- To ask effective questions to find out more about the health concern
- To use clarification strategies to ensure understanding of the answers



RESOURCES

- Small cards for writing questions
- Copies of Resources 1, 2 and 4
- Speech-bubbles prepared from Resource 3 or large blank speech-bubbles made from card
- Audio equipment  43–44

RELATED THEMES

Talking to your doctor (pages 184–194)
 Listening to people (pages 242–250)

HEALTH SKILLS

Learners may not have the confidence to ask questions about their health or medical concerns. They may not know what to ask, or how to ask, or may feel uncomfortable asking for the information they want.

Related health information

www.bbc.co.uk/health/talking/
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/

SKILLS FOR LIFE

When talking to health professionals, learners need to be able to:

- ask questions and make requests so that they can get the information they need
- use strategies for clarifying and confirming understanding
- adapt level of formality to the situation and context.

Core curriculum

Activities in this theme will contribute to learning in the following curriculum areas:

- ask questions to obtain information in everyday contexts (**L**SLc/E2.2)
- ask questions to clarify understanding (**L**SLc/E2.4)
- ask questions to obtain information in familiar and unfamiliar contexts (**L**SLc/E3.4, **L**SLc/L1.2)
- use appropriate phrases for interruption (**L**SLd/L1.3).

- Draw a large question mark on the board / flipchart. Ask learners what it means. Give a written example of a question.
- Discuss why health professionals ask questions (to find out about your symptoms, background information, to help them make a diagnosis, to decide how best to treat you).
- Ask learners if they ask questions about their conditions and treatment. Discuss the reasons for asking questions – to find out more, to reassure you, to check points, to challenge what is being said, to show interest.
- Be aware that there may be a reluctance in some cultures to question people who are deemed to be experts at what they do or people who are highly educated – health professionals in particular. Stress the benefits of asking questions to the patient and to the health professional. Emphasise to learners that health professionals will not be offended and in fact encourage patients to ask questions.

Generally, what sort of questions does your doctor ask?

Why is it important to ask questions?

What type of questions might you want to ask a doctor?

ACTIVITY 1

Identify difficulties in asking questions and consider solutions

- Read the introductory paragraph on Resource 1. Encourage learners to share ideas about the four situations – who the people are, what is happening, how they are feeling.
- Read through the thought-bubbles and ask learners to discuss in pairs why they think each person is reluctant to ask a question.
- Discuss the questions that each of the people wants to ask, keeping a record of questions learners suggest.
- Gather ideas of other difficulties learners have with asking questions, prompting with questions if necessary. List or mindmap the difficulties on the board / flipchart.
- Spend some time discussing possible ways of overcoming these difficulties, reminding learners that all questions are important.

Support

- Cut Resource 1 into four and give each pair of learners one picture and thought-bubble to discuss.
- Read through the thought-bubbles again and ask questions to help learners focus on the person's concerns (e.g. 'What is he worried about?' 'What's stopping him from asking his question?').

ESOL

- Be prepared to explain some of the expressions used in the thought-bubbles (e.g. 'make a fuss', 'cope', 'I don't suppose').
- Encourage learners who are having difficulty forming questions to work with native English speakers.

Do you only think of questions after you've left?

When you see the doctor, what things can make it difficult to ask questions?

ACTIVITY 2 43

Explore different questions

- Explain to learners that they are going to listen to a doctor talking to his patient.
- Play the audio clip through once and ask learners if they fully understood what the doctor said.

- Discuss learners' difficulties and reasons for them (e.g. the doctor is talking too fast, using long or unfamiliar words, giving unclear instructions, etc.). List these on the left-hand side of the board / flipchart.
- Discuss with learners things they can do to help their understanding, such as asking the doctor to repeat something; repeating back what the doctor has said to check; asking the doctor to explain meanings of words; simply saying that they don't understand. Write these strategies on the board / flipchart, then link suitable strategies to possible difficulties on the board with coloured lines.
- Hand out Resource 2, or display enlarged versions of the speech-bubbles. Discuss how the questions link to the information, reading out relevant parts of the audio script. Note: focus the discussion on clarification strategies (blue / rounded speech-bubbles) for less confident learners or obtaining further information (yellow / rectangular speech-bubbles) for more confident learners, although learners will benefit from the discussion of both.

If you don't understand what your doctor says, what can you do or say?

TIPS

- Replay the audio clips until learners are sure of the content.
- Learners may prefer to have a written text of the audio scripts for reference.

Support

Focus on using two or three questions to clarify information (blue / rounded speech-bubbles). Read aloud the relevant parts of the audio script to link the information with each question. Ask learners to underline any words that are repeated in the question.

ESOL

- Learners may need to hear the audio clip several times. Play it through once for gist. Encourage learners to talk about the context and the information the doctor is giving. Then play the audio clip again, pausing it to compare learners' ideas with the actual information the doctor gives.
- To encourage learners to focus on the key question words, provide copies of Resource 2 with the question words (i.e. the words in **bold** in the speech-bubbles: 'where', 'how', 'which', 'when', 'what', etc.) removed; ask learners to replace the missing words.

ACTIVITY 3 44

Practise wording questions

- Use Resource 3 in a similar manner to Activity 2 but this time learners listen to the audio clip of the pharmacist and compose their own questions (in pairs) using the blank speech-bubbles. Some learners may prefer to have larger speech-bubbles on cards to write on. You may need to play the audio clip several times.
- Display all the speech-bubbles and discuss as a group. Remind learners that everyone has the right to ask questions and to understand the issues.

What do you want to ask?

How will you word your question?

Support

- Read out the audio script one sentence at a time, more than once if required.
- Ask learners direct questions about what they have heard.
- Support learners to convert their answers into questions where they did not hear or understand the information.
- Write learners' questions onto the speech-bubbles where necessary.

ESOL

Learners may need extra practice in forming questions. Ask learners to convert statements from the audio clip into questions by changing the word order and adding a question word to the front (e.g. 'There are two lots of tablets ...' might become 'How many lots of tablets are there?'). Provide opportunities for learners to practise saying the questions aloud.

ACTIVITY 4

Discuss ways of interrupting to ask questions

- Ask a confident learner or another colleague to explain what they did yesterday. As they do so, interrupt the speaker frequently and in mid-sentence to ask questions.
- Ask the speaker how it felt to be interrupted.
- Explain that if you want to interrupt someone to ask a question, there are ways to do it without causing problems for the speaker.
- Go through the tips on Resource 4, starting with the information in the left-hand column and discussing each point in turn. For example, learners might discuss gestures such as putting a hand up to indicate a question or making eye contact.

Support

Role-play 'interrupting' situations one to one with learners. Model interrupting appropriately using the tips on Resource 4. Support learners to practise interrupting you.

ESOL

- Draw attention to the phrases 'Excuse me' and 'Sorry', which are often used at the beginning of an interruption to make it sound more polite. Also draw attention to useful phrases for interrupting (e.g. 'Can I just stop you?' 'Could I just check ...?').
- Discuss the questions for interrupting – which can be used to ask for more information and which can be used to check information that is not clear.
- Ask learners to role-play the situations in the two audio clips, taking turns to practise interrupting.

How does it feel when someone interrupts you a lot? Do you lose your train of thought?

If you want to interrupt someone to ask a question, what hand gestures can you use? What can you say?

Action

- Invite a health professional to talk to learners about a topic that is relevant to them (e.g. something relevant to their age range or background, a health concern / condition, etc.). Ask the speaker to include a question-and-answer session at the end and to be prepared for learners to ask questions during the talk too.
- Before the talk, encourage learners to think of things they might want to know or questions they may want to ask. Remind them of the tips on Resource 4 for interrupting to ask questions.
- Ask learners to practise asking questions within their family or to report back about an appointment where they used these questioning skills.

What questions would you like to ask?

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RESOURCE 1

Health professionals will ask you a lot of questions. You can also ask them questions about your health concerns or treatment. How confident are you about asking questions?

I'm worried about the tests I've got to have. I don't want to make a fuss though.



I'm not sure what she means by taking the medicine at regular intervals. I don't want to ask in case she thinks I'm stupid.

I wonder how long it'll be until I feel better. I don't suppose he can tell me that.



I could ask the others how they cope but I don't want to interrupt.



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RESOURCE 2



Listen to the doctor.

What questions would you ask him?

Can I just check what you said about coming back? I've got to make another appointment for the end of October?

How long did you say until my next appointment?

When do I have to come back? Did you say in 4 months' time?

Which building did you say the pharmacy is in?

I didn't quite follow that bit. What did you say about a modification?

Did you say I have to take the medicine for another month?

Will these tablets give me any side-effects?

What sort of changes might there be in my symptoms?

How will I know if the symptoms are serious?

Where is C building, please?

Can you explain why you're increasing the dose?

I'm on holiday for the last two weeks in October. Would it be OK if I came the first week in November?

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RESOURCE 3



Listen to the pharmacist.

What questions would you ask her?

Empty speech bubble for writing questions.

Empty speech bubble for writing questions.

Empty speech bubble for writing questions.

Empty speech bubble for writing questions.

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RESOURCE 4



It can be difficult to interrupt when you want to ask a question.

It can also be difficult to ask questions in front of other people.

Here are some tips to help.

Tips for interrupting	
Things to do	Things to say
Wait until there's a pause in the talking	Could tell me why ...?
Gesture that you want to speak	Can I just stop you there for a minute?
Look as if you want to say something	Could I just check – did you say ...?
Put your question clearly and politely	Before you carry on, could you go over that last part again?
Remember that other people probably want to know the answer too!	Excuse me, could I ask ...?
Be confident – all questions are important	Sorry, but I'm really confused. Could you explain that last bit again, please?
Think about what you want to ask and keep it short and simple	Can I check what you meant by ...?

There are no specific answers for this theme.

ACTIVITY 1



Doctor: I'll see you in 4 weeks. You're doing really well – carry on with the medicine but remember that modification to your dosage that we discussed. Here's your prescription. You can take it to the pharmacy in C building. I'll see you in a month's time – no, perhaps we'll make that the end of October instead. Of course, if there's any change in your symptoms let me know.

ACTIVITY 3



Pharmacist: Mrs Smith, could you just confirm your address please? Thank you. Now, there're two lots of tablets here. These ones are to be taken with water after a meal, three times a day. Take these smaller ones twice a day, preferably on an empty stomach or several hours after eating. Oh, by the way, you might find one of those leaflets over there in the rack useful. OK, bye now!