

# Finding and Using Patient Education Materials

Martha M. Funnell, MS, RN, CDE

A great many things have changed with the implementation of the new pharmaceutical company regulations. Along with pens, notepads, and other trinkets, the educational materials produced by these companies are no longer allowed in many health care settings. Because many of these booklets and pamphlets provided an overview of diabetes and its treatment, providers often gave these materials to patients as reliable sources of information. Although these materials were not a substitute for education, they reinforced the information patients were given, provided a reference for when patients were home and had questions, and could be read by patients' family members to help them better understand diabetes.

## Finding Patient Education Materials

The good news is that there are a variety of other reliable resources where health care providers can obtain materials to distribute to patients. Both Internet-based and print materials are available. Although some patients are able to obtain information if you provide them with websites, most practices find it more efficient to download and print these materials and hand them out to patients, just as they did with the pharmaceutical company booklets in the past. Many of these sites also offer booklets that can be purchased for a modest fee. Buying these in bulk greatly reduces their cost.

The American Diabetes Association (ADA) offers a variety of educational materials through its website ([www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org)) and call-in center (1-800-DIABETES). The materials in the "All About Diabetes" section of the website are generally free for downloading. There are also recipes and an "Ask the Expert" section where patients can submit questions.

The ADA website offers additional materials in the "Shop for Books and Gifts" section, under "Patient Booklets and Pamphlets." Although there is a small cost for these materials, there are a variety of topics and materials written at various literacy levels and in several languages. For example, the Channel Series, designed for adults with type 2 diabetes, is written at an easy-to-understand low literacy level and is available in English and Spanish.

The National Diabetes Education Program ([www.ndep.nih.gov](http://www.ndep.nih.gov) and [www.yourdiabetesinfo.org](http://www.yourdiabetesinfo.org)) also offers a variety of patient education materials that can be downloaded and distributed. Because these are not copyrighted, clinics can add their logo, contact details, and other information. Once again, there are a variety of educational materials targeted for different literacy levels, populations, and languages. There are also materials to help health professionals improve education and care delivery and outcomes.

Most pharmaceutical companies now offer unbranded websites and

materials that can be downloaded by patients and that offer reliable information. Other resources include organizations (e.g., <http://diabetes.acponline.org/patient>) and commercial health care information companies (e.g., [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com) and [www.krames.com](http://www.krames.com)). These materials should be previewed and checked for accuracy, tone, and appropriateness to specific populations before they are distributed.

## Using Patient Education Materials

The common wisdom used to be that if you wanted to save money on educational materials, just check the trash can in the parking lot. Although health professionals cannot guarantee that their patients will use the materials provided, there are some ways to increase the likelihood that they will benefit from such resources.

- Rather than just handing patients a stack of materials, choose one or two items about which the patient has expressed a particular interest. Let patients know that you chose these particular materials because you think they will benefit from them.
- Take the time to highlight one or two key points or make a handwritten note of something to which patients should pay particular attention. This increases the likelihood that patients will follow through with recommendations in those areas. Health care professionals who use a computer in their examination rooms can go to a website and either print out or

review the materials with patients on the screen.

- Match materials to patients. Both content and pictures need to be representative of a patient's age, sex, ethnicity, and culture. Patients are more likely to read something if it looks as if it applies directly to them.
- Match reading levels to patients. Look for thorough but simply written materials that are adult in tone. In general, if there are a lot of non-diabetes-related words of more than two syllables, the reading level is too high for most patients.
- Pay attention to tone and avoid materials that have a lot of “shoulds” and “musts” or that preach or talk down to patients.
- Give a few patients you trust several different handouts or printouts and ask that they give you their candid opinions. Ask specifically what they do and do not like about these materials and whether they found them to be informative and inspiring.
- Make sure that the materials match the reality of diabetes. Patients struggle with making changes and dealing with the anger, fear, and frustration that often go with diabetes. Materials need to address these issues just as they address the clinical aspects of diabetes care.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported in part by grants NIH5P60 DK20572 and 1 R18 0K062323-01 of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases of the National Institutes of Health.

---

*Martha M. Funnell, MS, RN, CDE, is a research investigator at the Michigan Diabetes Research and Training Center and the Department of Medical Education at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor. She is an associate editor of Clinical Diabetes.*