

IMPROVING CARDIOVASCULAR RISK COMMUNICATIONS WITH YOUR PATIENTS

How to transform the conversation from bewildering to empowering

As clinicians, we spend a lot of time thinking about risk. For patients, however, probabilities and risk scores can come across as a confusing array of numbers, and a host of factors influence how a person understands and reacts to risk. As a result, many under- or over-estimate their risk of cardiovascular disease and complications. These perceptions can affect patients' adherence to treatment plans and their beliefs about whether their heart health can be improved.

Communicating risk is hard.

Risk is an abstract and multi-dimensional concept. Many patients are unfamiliar with risk terminology and reluctant to ask for clarification when they don't understand. Yet clinicians have little face time with patients and are not typically trained in risk communication.

The challenges are real—but not insurmountable.

We can—and should—do better.

Studies point to missed opportunities to effectively communicate risk related to primary and secondary cardiovascular disease prevention and treatment. How we present risk information can have a powerful impact on patients' perceptions and actions. In addition to helping patients understand their health, effective risk communication helps patient feel listened to, validated and involved in their care.

Risk discussions are at the core of informed decision making and should be patient-centered.

Communicating risk is a process.

Talking about risk isn't just about delivering information. Patients generally want the facts, but they also want clinicians to express encouragement, hope and empathy. Risk conversations should be informed by a patient's level of trust, emotions, readiness to know more, personality, and health literacy, including numeracy.

Risk communication is a process through which patients and clinicians build a shared understanding. Trust is the foundation, and patients' emotions often play a role too.

HOW RISK IS PRESENTED AFFECTS HOW PATIENTS REACT

Most probabilities can be expressed in terms of either losses or gains. This choice affects a patient's perception of how serious the risk is.

Loss Framing	Gain Framing
Dying	Surviving
Having a stroke	Avoiding a stroke
Having a side effect	Not having a side effect

Risk may be quantified as relative or absolute. Research shows it's best to give both.

Relative Risk	Absolute risk
Medication X reduces the risk of stroke by 50%	Medication X reduces the risk of stroke from 2 chances out of 100 (a 2% risk) to 1 chance out of 100 (a 1% risk).

Many factors affect patients' willingness and ability to take in risk information. Consider the context.

If...	Consider...
The patient just received a diagnosis	Waiting for a follow-up visit for more in-depth discussion. Some people need time to digest new medical realities before risks can be fully understood.
The patient is asymptomatic	Emphasizing the risks of not taking action. Many people, such as those in the early stages of hypertension or hyperlipidemia, tend to under-estimate the true impact of the risk if they are not experiencing symptoms.

Risk conversations should help patients interpret what the numbers actually mean. Many patients admit to nodding their head not because they understand—but because they are feeling overwhelmed or embarrassed to ask questions. The onus is on us to bridge the gap.

An okay conversation involves...	An ideal conversation involves...*
Reporting ASCVD or CHA ₂ DS ₂ VASc score.	Explaining what risk scores are and why they're useful.
Reporting risk statistics.	Conveying risk in multiple ways (for example, through words, numbers and visuals), while providing a personalized interpretation of what the numbers mean.
Offering recommendations.	Acknowledgement of patient's feelings, motivations and challenges, leading to a shared decision about next steps.
A chance to ask questions.	Ample opportunities for patient to confirm understanding and clarify any sources of confusion.

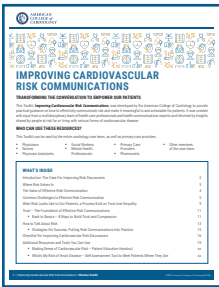
**Apply the teach-back method and ask patients to explain what they heard in their own words.*

EFFECTIVE RISK COMMUNICATION GIVES PATIENTS THE INFORMATION THEY NEED TO MAKE INFORMED HEALTH DECISIONS AND LEAD HEALTHIER LIVES.

The American College of Cardiology's **Improving Cardiovascular Risk Communications Toolkit** is designed to help you have conversations that resonate with patients and help them feel empowered to improve their cardiovascular health. The toolkit was developed with input from clinicians, health communications experts and patients.

WHAT'S IN THE TOOLKIT?

Tools for You



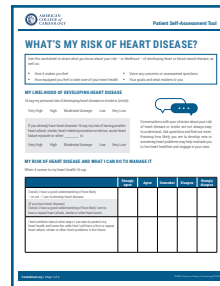
- Practical tips on building trust and compassion
- Key challenges to effective cardiovascular risk communications
- How patients interpret – and often feel – risk
- Strategies for talking about risk through
 - Case scenarios
 - Checklists

Tools for Your Patients



What is Risk?

This educational handout offers a basic overview of risk and how it relates to their cardiovascular health.



What's My Risk of Heart Disease?

This self-assessment gauges a patient's understanding of their cardiovascular risk, the extent to which they believe they can affect this risk, and personal goals, preferences, and other factors that play a role in their health decisions. It can be given to patients in the waiting room or after a visit.