Strengthening health communication skills to enhance patient understanding for improved self and family care involves some specific steps. Below are some practical suggestions and a tool — a communication technique referred to as “teach back.”

**Action Steps**

- Have paper, pencils or pens available for patients to write down important information at the time of their visit.
- If you are a provider who addresses health issues such as diabetes, gastrointestinal issues, mental health problems, have health literature on these subjects in accessible places in your office for patient education and hand it personally to your patient who you think it will help.
- If your office or clinic has a website that provides patient care information, ensure that your patient knows how to access this. Give them a “business card” or other

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written paper with the address on it — write a note on it from you about when they should access it so it is felt as a personal invitation for them to use it and patient understanding for improved self and family care “talk” to you.

■ If your clinic or practice utilizes nurse practitioners or case managers, make sure your patients know who they are and how they can contact these individuals with questions about their self-care.

Teach Back: A Communication Plan

■ Employ the “teach back” approach to patient communication: After you have communicated the diagnosis, treatment plan, etc, ask the patient to “repeat back” the instructions to you. This provides an opportunity to hear what the patient has heard and to clarify any discrepancies in how they understood the care plans.

■ Ask the patient if there is anything in the self-care plan that would make it difficult or impossible for them to follow, and then address those issues in a practical and helpful manner. If need be, refer them to the care manager to specifically address these barriers to their health care plan.

■ Relate the diagnoses and follow-up plans in terms that the patient and family members can understand.

If agreeable to the patient, invite in any other family member that has come with them so that two people rather than one, hears the plan and action steps.

■ If a language barrier is anticipated in the visit, either you or your office staff should ask the patient to feel free to bring a family member or friend who can communicate with the doctor and with the patient. If a patient is older and has hearing or vision problems, suggest that they bring a family member or friend who can assist in the healthcare conversation.

■ Employ the “dual discharge” approach: the physician talks to the patient about the results, treatment plan and follow up care; a nurse follows up with computerized discharge instructions and goes over the same material again.

Good Communication Fosters Good Patient Self-Care.

One of the most obvious but subtle contributors to impaired health literacy is that patients are often not aware of what they do not understand. Using the “teach back” approach can help physicians and health care providers recognize what the patient has not understood, and clarify information and care instructions before the patient leaves the clinic, emergency room or office. Helping patients process important information can optimize health care delivery and better ensure patient health.