



# What Is **Teach-Back**?



**This booklet outlines how to do teach-back. It provides example scenarios and scripts for you to practice with. Use them. You'll get a feel for what it's like and get some ideas about how to start a teach-back conversation.**



# The Basic Steps

**Teach-back** is a way for you to confirm that patients understand what you've told them. It is also a way to be sure you're explaining things clearly. With this method, you ask someone to repeat the information that you have just given them, in their own words.

- 1. Organize what you want to say.** Think about giving the needed information in "chunks" – short logical units that the listener can easily retain and repeat back. Also choose a logical order for your information chunks.
- 2. Tell the listener the first part, or chunk,** of what you need to convey.
- 3. Ask the person to explain it back to you.** That is, check that the person can explain the information chunk you have just given.
- 4. Explain again in a different way,** if the person doesn't give you back the information accurately. Only re-explain the parts that weren't accurate.
- 5. Ask the person to explain it back** to you once more. Check that you have explained the information well enough.



Teach-back can feel awkward at first, but that feeling lessens the more you do it. With practice, it gets easier and takes less time. And it will be easier for people to understand your instructions and follow them.

- 6. Explain the next part** of what you want to say. Go on to the next information chunk that you need to communicate.
- 7. Ask the person to explain back** the information you have just given. Check that you have explained the information well enough.
- 8. Repeat** the process until you get through all of the information.



## Teach-Back Opening Lines

Here are some ways that healthcare providers often start a teach-back conversation with their patients.

- I know we discussed a lot just now. It would help me know that I'm being clear if you tell me what I just said.
- In your own words, would you please tell me what I just said?
- Will you tell me what you heard me say just now?
- Will you tell me how you would explain that to a friend, partner, or family member?
- When you get home and it's time to [follow a care instruction], how will you do it?
- When you get home and it's time to [follow a care instruction], what's the first thing you will do?

## Tips for Successful Teach-Back

- Don't save teach-back for the last moments of your visit with a client or patient. Use it whenever you are giving instructions or want to confirm understanding.
- Teach-back isn't just for clinicians. Anyone in a care-providing workplace can use teach-back.
- Remember that you have the responsibility to make your information understood—if the listener isn't understanding, it's not their fault.
- Try not to get frustrated, teach-back gets easier over time.
- Show your listener that you are paying attention to them by using eye contact, friendly body language, and a caring tone of voice.
- Use simple and clear explanations: Give only a few messages and use the plainest language you can.



# Teach-Back Scripts for Practice

The following pages include several scripts that you can use to practice teach-back. If you are practicing with a partner, it's a good idea to take turns role-playing as the provider and patient.



## Additional Resources

For more training resources, including videos, go to [oralhealthsupport.ucsf.edu/oral-health-literacy-toolkit](https://oralhealthsupport.ucsf.edu/oral-health-literacy-toolkit), and look for the “Oral Health Literacy Toolkit Resources” section.

## During Teach-Back: Watch for These Behaviors

After you run through one or more of the scripts, it can be helpful to reflect on how well it went. The person who plays the patient can observe the provider's skill at teach-back and give informal feedback. If you can have a third person observe the role-play, you may get even more insight into how to improve with more practice.

Here are some things to notice in the run-throughs:

- Were messages clear and simple? For example, were sentences short, or did you think a patient could get lost in the number of words spoken?
- Did the provider speak slowly and use friendly body language, such as smiling and nodding?
- Was the patient asked to teach back information or demonstrate the skill?
- Were questions for the patient phrased in a nonjudgmental way?
- Did the provider repeat information when the patient hadn't understood the first time? Did they also ask the patient to teach-back the info again?
- Did the provider congratulate the patient when they repeated information correctly?

# Explaining Fluoride Varnish

Provider:	Parent:
<p>We would like to paint fluoride varnish on your child's teeth. Fluoride makes your child's teeth harder and stronger, which helps protect them from getting cavities. <b>Can you tell me in your own words what fluoride does?</b></p>	<p>I guess it is a paint or varnish like what we put on wood? And it helps fight cavities.</p>
<p>That's close. Let me explain it more clearly this time so you have all of the information you need to make a decision. What we do is use a little brush like a nail polish brush to paint a liquid on your child's teeth. This is the fluoride and it dries quickly and hardens. Once it does it will help keep your child from getting cavities. Now, I want to make sure I said that well. <b>Would you try explaining it back to me?</b></p>	<p>You said the fluoride dries quickly and will harden, and that it will protect my kid's teeth.</p>
<p>That's right.</p>	<p>OK. Let's do it.</p>
<p>I think that is the right decision. We will do it today, before the end of your visit. One thing to remember is that your child might feel a little stickiness on their teeth today. So we would want you to wait until tomorrow to brush your child's teeth. They also shouldn't eat or drink anything crunchy or very hot today. <b>Will you repeat those care instructions back to me, so I know that I was clear?</b></p>	<p>I can give them normal food and drinks, but I shouldn't brush their teeth.</p>
<p>Yes, that's right. Just don't give them anything very hot or crunchy today.</p>	<p>Okay. They can eat and drink normally, except for anything hot or crunchy.</p>
<p>Perfect. Do you have any other questions for me about fluoride varnish?</p>	

# Recommending a New Filling

Provider:	Patient:
<p>An old filling on one of your back teeth is cracked, and I can see some decay around its edges. I think we should replace it with a new filling. I would like you to make an appointment with the receptionist for a filling replacement. <b>To make sure I said that clearly, will you repeat that back to me in your own words?</b></p>	<p>I think you said I have a cavity in one of my fillings.</p>
<p>What's happened is that you had a cavity repaired with a filling several years ago and over time normal wear and tear led to the filling cracking. This can lead to more tooth decay so we want to repair it.</p> <p>Here's what will happen. The receptionist will schedule another appointment for you when we are done today. It will take about two hours. When you come in, I will numb the tooth. When your mouth and teeth are numb, I will remove the old filling and any tooth decay that might be there. Then I will put in a new filling. <b>I just gave you a lot of information. Will you repeat it back to me, so I know I explained it well enough?</b></p>	<p>I'll make an appointment with the receptionist today, and at my next appointment you'll numb my tooth and then replace the filling.</p>
<p>That's exactly right. Now let's talk about after the new filling is done. I will give you detailed instructions after your appointment. But here are the basics: Your mouth will be numb for a while after the procedure. Don't chew anything until the numbness goes away, to avoid biting your cheek or tongue. <b>Again, that's a lot to take in—will you repeat it back to me?</b></p>	<p>My mouth will be numb for a while and to be careful not to bite my cheek or tongue.</p>
<p>That's pretty good, but one way to avoid biting your cheek or tongue is to not eat food for a few hours after we replace your filling. Would you say that back to me one more time?</p>	<p>You said to eat only after the numbness goes away.</p>

# Suggesting Some New Behaviors

Provider:	Patient:
<p>It looks like you are doing a great job brushing and flossing your teeth, but the hard coating around your teeth—the enamel—is getting worn away by all of the acidity in the sports drinks you are drinking. When acid from a sports drink touches our teeth for a long time, it weakens them. It would help your teeth if you drank more water instead. When you do have sports drinks, try to drink them all in one sitting, rather than taking sips over the whole day. That was a lot of information. <b>Will you say it back to me in your own words, so I know I explained it clearly?</b></p>	<p>Yeah, so you are saying even though I brush well, the sports drinks are bad for my teeth.</p>
<p>Yes, and drinking water most of the time would help prevent your teeth from getting weaker. And if you do have a sports drink, drink it all at once instead of through the day. <b>Can you explain that back to me?</b></p>	<p>If I do have a sports drink, I should drink only one?</p>
<p>Sure. That would be fine, but we also want to make sure that you're not sipping it all day. We want you to drink it in one sitting so it's not on your teeth all day. I know that's a little complicated, and I want to be sure I said it in a way that makes sense. <b>Can you tell me what I just said?</b></p>	<p>You said to just drink them, when I have one, not sip on them.</p>
<p>That's right. We also want to strengthen your teeth again. We will give you a high-fluoride toothpaste to use twice a day. It has extra fluoride, which helps harden the coating around your teeth—the enamel. To give the fluoride as long as possible to strengthen your teeth, I'd like you to not rinse after you brush—just spit and let the remaining toothpaste stay on your teeth all night. <b>OK, to review and make sure I was clear, will you tell me how you will use this new toothpaste?</b></p>	<p>I'm going to brush twice a day with a new toothpaste... I guess I'll get that at the drug store? And I'll use mouthwash to rinse afterwards.</p>
<p>You won't have to buy the high-fluoride paste at the drug store. We will give you a small tube to take home today. Instead of rinsing with anything, I'd like you to finish brushing your teeth by just spitting out most of the toothpaste. But don't rinse. That will leave a film of fluoride to work on your teeth overnight. <b>Will you repeat that for me quickly, to make sure I explained it well?</b></p>	<p>Oh, OK. You'll give me some special toothpaste to take home. After I brush, I'll spit but not rinse, so some toothpaste stays on my teeth.</p>

# Explaining Toddler Tooth-Brushing

Provider:	Parent:
<p>Your child's teeth look pretty good. But it's definitely time to start brushing their teeth. Young children need their baby teeth for eating, talking, and to hold space for the adult teeth to grow in. It's important to keep them healthy with regular brushing. You can use a baby toothbrush and a smear of fluoride toothpaste that's the size of a grain of rice. Brush all sides of all the teeth. <b>Will you tell me how you will start taking care of your child's teeth?</b></p>	<p>Wow, I didn't know, and that seems hard. She's going to be squirmy and want to do it herself.</p>
<p>Lots of people don't know that parents have to take care of baby teeth, and you're right, an energetic toddler can make it challenging. I can give you a sheet with ideas that have worked for other parents. We can give you a baby toothbrush and a sample of fluoride toothpaste if you like. That way you can get started with a smear of toothpaste about the size of a grain of rice, twice a day. <b>Will you say that back to me in your own words? It would help me know that I'm being clear.</b></p>	<p>I have to start brushing my baby's teeth, and you're going to help me.</p>
<p>Yes, I will help you as much as I can today, so you can do this at home. I will give you a baby-size toothbrush and toothpaste, plus a page of tips for brushing toddlers' teeth. You find a position for brushing that is comfortable for both you and your child. This can take a few tries, but the tip sheet has some suggestions, and you know how your toddler likes to be held. You'll use a small smear of fluoride toothpaste and brush all the sides of all the teeth. <b>Would you mind repeating that back to me?</b></p>	<p>You said to use the fluoride toothpaste and brush all the sides of their teeth.</p>
<p>Yes, that's great. And how much toothpaste will you use?</p>	<p>A smear about the size of a grain of rice.</p>
<p>Exactly. You should both get used to the routine before long, but please call the office if it's not working out, and we'll try to help.</p>	

