

# Pharmacy Technician Communication Responsibilities

**T**HE ABILITY to communicate effectively with patients, customers, physicians, colleagues, and other health care providers is an essential skill for anyone who is working in a pharmacy. Playing an important role in the health care industry today, pharmacy technicians need to have a well rounded skill set in order to effectively manage the pharmacy and help customers with their medication needs. Communicating effectively takes practice. You can model yourself after a team member and learn and observe from the way they handle various situations in the pharmacy.



## Objective:



Describe professional communication standards and review examples of controlled substance communication guidelines.

## Key Terms:



active listening  
controlled substances  
decorum

Drug Enforcement  
Agency (DEA)  
empathetic  
hospice

interpersonal skills  
nonverbal  
communication  
open ended questions

## Professional Communication Standards and Controlled Substance Guidelines

### PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION STANDARDS

Pharmacy technicians have very strong technical skills that are essential for working in a pharmacy. Effective patient communication is another essential skill needed to provide com-

prehensive patient care. Identifying patient issues and needs, developing and communicating solutions, and ensuring patient's understanding of treatments are essential skills for pharmacy technicians. Strong communication skills enable pharmacy technicians to build trusting relationships with patients and ensure an effective exchange of information between the technician and the patient.

Strong communication and **interpersonal skills**, set of abilities enabling a person to interact positively and work effectively with others, are essential to working successfully in health related settings. Pharmacy technicians interact with many different people every day including colleagues, patients, physicians, and other healthcare professionals.

Communication consists of a sender, the message, a receiver, feedback, and barriers. It takes time and practice to become comfortable and proficient. Taking time to reflect after a positive interaction about what went well and what contributed to the success of the communication can help to identify strengths that can be further developed.

## Communicating with the Pharmacist

Communicating with the pharmacist:

- ◆ Use the proper terminology to ensure that the pharmacist and the technician share common definitions associated with the circumstance
- ◆ In the presence of patients refer to the pharmacist using the title “Doctor.”
- ◆ Listen intently to the pharmacist.
- ◆ Request clarification of information received from the pharmacist.
- ◆ Report adverse reactions to the pharmacist.
- ◆ Feedback is essential between the pharmacist and the pharmacy technician.

## Communicating with the Patient

Communicating with the patient:

- ◆ Keep communication simple, short, and specific. Only tell patients what they need to know. Select key points and reinforce and repeat them.
- ◆ Smile and make eye contact.
- ◆ Use courteous words and phrases. Practice **decorum**, proper or polite behavior, in the pharmacy.
- ◆ Be an **empathetic**, showing an ability to understand and share the feelings of another, listener.
- ◆ Use **active listening**, requires that the listener fully concentrates, understands, responds, and remembers what has been said, techniques to help the patient feel heard and understood.
- ◆ Use **open ended questions**, cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, to encourage patients to share information or discuss experiences in their own words.

- ◆ Adjust your location if you are struggling to hear a patient. You may want to come out from behind the counter to create a more personal space with the patient.
- ◆ Adjust your tone if you become frustrated if you see that your communication is failing with the patient.
- ◆ Adjust your vocabulary if the patient is having difficulty understanding the information. Use plain language and avoid medical slang. Pay attention to the patient's own terminology and use those terms yourself in the discussion.
- ◆ Pay attention to **nonverbal communication**, communication without words such as facial expression, eye contact, and body position. Don't assume the patient is listening to you. Mannerisms and gestures can often indicate whether or not the patient understands the information. Ask questions to test the patient's understanding and comprehension of important instructions. A relaxed posture including uncrossing the arms, removing the hands from the pockets, and facing the patient directly, can put the patient at ease.
- ◆ Be sensitive to cultural and language differences.
- ◆ Preserve patient confidentiality.



**FIGURE 1.** Good communication helps customers to feel at ease, in control, and makes them feel valued.

## Communicating with Other Healthcare Professionals

Communicating with other healthcare professionals:

- ◆ Always refer to physicians, chiropractors, and dentists using the title “Doctor.”
- ◆ Refer to other supervisory professionals using appropriate courtesy titles such as Mr., Mrs., or Miss plus the last name, or Sir, Madam, or Ma’am.
- ◆ Develop collaborative working relationships with physicians.
- ◆ Be concise with recommendations and provide enough information to physicians to help them assess clinical situations.
- ◆ Maintain an assertive yet friendly manner.
- ◆ Maintain your courtesy and respect in the face of rudeness.

## Communicating on the Telephone

Communicating on the telephone:

- ◆ When you answer the phone, identify yourself and the pharmacy.
- ◆ Always begin and end the conversation with a conventional courtesy such as “Good morning” and “Thank you for calling.”
- ◆ Use a natural, conversational voice and be friendly but not too familiar with the caller.
- ◆ Be a good listener. Pay attention to what the caller is saying and focus on their needs.
- ◆ Be pleasant and courteous and speak clearly, pronounce each word distinctly, and be prepared to repeat yourself.
- ◆ Refer any medication questions to the pharmacist.
- ◆ Politely asking a customer to hold is fine, just make sure to set expectations such as “please hold while I look up your account and I will be back in about 5 minutes.”
- ◆ Maintain patient confidentiality.



**FIGURE 2.** While it may seem obvious to just pick up the phone and say “hello,” answering professional calls is very different from answering personal calls. It’s easy to slip up and accidentally speak to a customer the way you would speak to your friend.

## CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

**Controlled substances** are drugs or chemicals whose manufacture, possession, or use is regulated or prohibited by a government. Controlled substances can be addictive and have the potential to be abused. The **Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)** is a United States federal law enforcement agency tasked with combating drug trafficking and distribution within the United States. The DEA works to ensure that prescriptions for controlled substances are medically valid.

### Drug Schedules

Drugs, substances, and certain chemicals used to make drugs are classified into five categories or schedules depending on their use and the potential for dependency and abuse.

- ◆ Schedule I: Drugs with no accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse.
- ◆ Schedule II: Drugs with a high potential for abuse, with use potentially leading to severe psychological or physical dependence.

- ◆ Schedule III: Drugs with a moderate to low potential for abuse, with use potentially leading to moderate to low psychological or physical dependence.
- ◆ Schedule IV: Drugs with a low potential for abuse, with use potentially leading to low psychological or physical dependence.
- ◆ Schedule V: Drugs with a very low potential for abuse, with use potentially leading to very low psychological or physical dependence.

## DEA Regulations

The DEA regulations for communicating controlled substance prescriptions to pharmacies outline the rules for submission of these prescriptions from licensed prescribing providers to pharmacies.

- ◆ Prescribers are prohibited from delegating the medical determination of need for a controlled substance. Prescriptions must be issued by prescribers acting in the usual course of their professional practice.
- ◆ Prescribers are prohibited from delegating their signature, their approval of the elements of a prescription, or their responsibility for ensuring that all required elements of a prescription are included.
- ◆ Schedule II prescriptions can be hand written or computer generated but must be signed in ink by the prescriber.
- ◆ Pharmacies can only dispense Schedule III, IV, and V controlled substances with a written, oral, or faxed prescription.
- ◆ Patients can only transmit written prescriptions.
- ◆ Prescribers can transmit oral or faxed prescriptions in addition to written prescriptions.
- ◆ Oral and faxed prescriptions must contain all the required elements of a prescription except the prescriber signature.



## FURTHER EXPLORATION...

### ONLINE CONNECTION: Conversation: A Lost Art in the Digital Age

With texting, e-mail, Snapchat, and Facebook, for many individuals face to face conversation is used less and less often. These apps allow us to converse with each other quickly and easily. Often these ways of communicating reduce the need to speak to another human being. This has led to conversations taking place mainly via technological devices. We no longer need to talk with receptionists, clerks, technicians, or even coworkers, we simply engage with a screen to communicate what we want to say. Read the article “Conversation a lost art in digital age,” at the web site <http://www.freep.com/story/life/advice/2015/06/15/conversation-skills-digital-age/71135212/>. Think about how you communicate with your friends and family. Do you have conversations or do you find yourself using technology instead? Do you think that using technology has affected your ability to communicate with others?

- ◆ Emergency oral prescriptions can be transmitted only by a prescriber and must be followed up by a written prescription within seven days.
- ◆ Schedule II prescriptions for individuals in a **hospice**, care and support for the terminally ill patient, or long term care facility can be transmitted by fax by an individual appointed by the prescriber.
- ◆ Schedule III, IV, and V for the purpose of refill can be transferred between pharmacies on a one time basis. The transfer must be communicated directly between two licensed pharmacists.

## Safety Recommendations

Safety recommendations for prescribers issuing controlled substance prescriptions by telephone include the following:

- ◆ The caller should introduce themselves indicating their name, credentials, and identify who they are calling on behalf of.
- ◆ Provide a return telephone number at which the prescriber can be contacted.
- ◆ Confirm the patient identity.
- ◆ Spell the name of the medication.
- ◆ Avoid using abbreviations or acronyms for drug names.
- ◆ Provide complete dosage and route of administration.
- ◆ Ensure order is clear and understandable to the person receiving the telephone order.

Recommendations when issuing controlled substances to patients include the following:

- ◆ Use active listening techniques and allow the patient sufficient time to voice their concerns.
- ◆ Use terminology that the patient understands.
- ◆ Verbal instructions may be reinforced with visual aids and printed materials.
- ◆ Have patients repeat instructions in their own words.
- ◆ Ask the patient if they have any questions or concerns that have not been addressed.



**FIGURE 3.** Your pharmacist can help you to learn how to use your prescription and nonprescription medicines safely and to increase the benefits and decrease the risks.

## Summary:



Strong communication and interpersonal skills are essential to working successfully in health related settings. Pharmacy technicians interact with many different people



every day including colleagues, patients, physicians, and other healthcare professionals. Strong communication skills enable the pharmacy technician to build trusting relationships with these professionals leading to better care for patients. It takes time and practice to become comfortable and proficient. Pharmacy technicians must use additional care when dispensing medications that are classified as controlled substances. Many of these drugs have the potential to be abused and a likelihood of psychological or physical dependence. It is important for pharmacy technicians to know and understand the regulations associated with the dispensing of these medications.

## Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Explain at least 4 communication skills used when communicating with the pharmacist and at least 4 skills used when communicating with other healthcare professionals.
2. Explain at least 6 communication skills used when communicating with patients.
3. Describe proper telephone etiquette.
4. Explain the 5 drug schedules and how drugs are placed into each category.
5. Explain at least 6 of the DEA regulations for communicating controlled substance prescriptions to pharmacies.
6. List 5 recommendations when issuing controlled substances to patients.

## Expanding Your Knowledge:



Visit the Keirsey Web site at <https://www.keirsey.com> and register for free. Take the Temperament Sorter II self evaluation test to discover your personality type. According to Keirsey Temperament Theory there are four basic groups that describe human behavior; artisans, guardians, rationals, and idealists. Find out what type of person you are.

## Web Links:



### Controlled Substances-Office Practice

<https://www.ismiemutual.com/sites/ismiemutual.com/files/controlledSubstances.pdf>

### Improving Communication: Developing Effective Communication Skills

<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/improving-communication.html>

### Nonverbal Behavior Basics for Pharmacists

<https://www.pharmacytimes.com/contributor/alan-polnariiev-pharmd-ms-cgp/2015/11/nonverbal-behavior-basics-for-pharmacists>