

# Helpful Hints for Communication with Non-Vocal Patients

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[www.lipreadingtranslation.com](http://www.lipreadingtranslation.com)

Talking with non-vocal patients (such as those on mechanical ventilation in a hospital), especially those that are too weak to easily communicate in other ways (such as by writing), is often a frustrating experience for a patients' family and caregivers. But it is most frustrating for the patients themselves. For those times when a lipreader is not available, here are some things you can do to enhance one-on-one communication:

1. If the patient normally wears dentures, remember that dentures give a normal "shape" to the jaw and lips, and give the tongue the necessary structure with which to shape words clearly. If the patient is willing and able to wear their dentures, by all means put them in. This will make them much easier to lipread.
2. If a patient normally wears glasses or hearing aids, be sure s/he is wearing these also, if possible. This ensures optimal readiness for communication.
3. Make sure the patient's lips, mouth, and tongue are moist and lubricated, including the inside rim of the lips, so they can move easily and don't stick to their teeth. It's a good idea to wipe out the inside of the mouth with a moistened sponge-on-a-stick, and to put lip balm on the lips.
4. When beginning a conversation with a non-vocal patient, first establish a "confirmation protocol." Make sure they are alert and coherent enough to respond to you, and make sure that they can hear you clearly. Ask a couple of yes-or-no questions, and make sure they can indicate "yes" or "no" to you clearly. This way they can confirm that *you* have understood *them* correctly.
5. With yes-or-no questions, be sure not to ask the patient a two-part question. In other words, never say, "Does your back hurt, or is your chest bothering you?" Instead say, "Does your back hurt?" and wait for a response.
6. Remind the patient that when we lip-read, normal full sentences are easier to understand than single words repeated over and over. For example, it is generally easier to understand "I want to talk to the nurse" than it is to understand "nurse" repeated over and over.
7. Remind the patient that it is easier to understand them when they are speaking with a normal rhythm and cadence than it is to understand someone who...is...talking...very...slowly...and...un...naturally. That said, if the patient's usual mode of talking is very rapid, they may have to slow down a little.
8. Don't turn away while a patient is still talking or gesturing, even if you think you understood them. Wait until they are finished, and confirm first. This helps reduce frustration and anxiety.
9. If a patient is trying to communicate by writing, make sure the surface they are writing on is very firm (such as a clip board or dry erase board) and use a felt tip (medium or large point) pen or marker that is easy to grip, so that each mark/stroke is recorded.
10. If you cannot understand something that a patient is trying to communicate, and the patient is very alert, try resorting to spelling it out. Get a large alphabet board, and ask them to indicate yes or no to each letter as you spell out a word.
11. Allow yourself to really *be* with the patient you are communicating with. Make and maintain eye contact. Touch their arm or hand. Notice their facial expressions. Communication is so much more than just the words on their lips.