

Language Matters

Plain Language Summary

The language used when communicating about diabetes, and the people living with it, can contribute to stigma and stereotyping. This document provides practical examples of language that will encourage positive interactions with people with diabetes.

Background

Words matter and language has impact. It can leave a deep mark on our thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and experiences. When inappropriate language is used with or about people with diabetes, it can negatively affect their confidence, well-being, and ability or desire to take care of themselves. It can also impact their relationship with different health professionals and their willingness to access the health-care system.

At its best, good use of language—verbal, written and non-verbal communication (i.e., body language) that is more inclusive—can lower anxiety, build confidence, educate, and help to improve self-care. On the other hand, poor communication can be shaming, hurtful, and affect self-care practices, which can result in worse outcomes.

Considerations

Canada's population is diverse, and so is the population of people with diabetes. No single framework can speak to the needs of everyone in Canada. A first step in destigmatizing diabetes is raising awareness of the importance of language used when talking with and about people with diabetes. More work needs to be done to create recommendations on proper language usage for specific groups, including those of African/Caribbean/Black, South Asian, and Chinese descent; those living with low income; and newcomers to Canada. Further work addressing the unique needs of Indigenous people with diabetes in Canada should be led by Indigenous groups.

Recommendations

People living with diabetes deserve to be spoken with and about in ways that are respectful and inclusive. Diabetes Canada recommends that the language used in all settings and contexts:

- is accessible to people with diabetes and easy to understand;
- is motivating and encouraging, and acknowledges the efforts people with diabetes are making to manage their health;
- is empathetic and compassionate and works to understand the perspective of people with diabetes;

- avoids judging, shaming, and/or placing blame on people with diabetes for their condition;
- is sensitive to the type of diabetes that the person is living with; and
- aligns with the preferences of the person with diabetes.

| Avoid | Use instead |
|--|---|
| Referring to “diabetes” generally when a statement is only accurate for specific type(s) | Type 1 diabetes, type 2 diabetes, gestational diabetes, prediabetes |
| Focusing appointments on glycated hemoglobin (A1C) results | People with diabetes are more than just their numbers. Focusing on A1C can make people feel like they have failed at properly managing their diabetes. Treat discussions as a check-in and not an evaluation. Use A1C as an opportunity to ask about both successes and struggles, and offer suggestions/support. |
| Diabetic, patient, suffering | Person living with diabetes, has diabetes |
| Disease | Condition |
| Overweight, obese | Person living with overweight/obesity |
| Compliant, noncompliant, adherent, nonadherent | Collaborative terms that acknowledge the realities of people’s lives (e.g., “Demands of diabetes exceed current capacity”) |
| Prevent, prevention | Reducing risk of... |
| Blood test | Monitoring, self-monitoring, checking |
| Should, should not, can’t, must, must not, have to | Here are some options..., you could try..., consider these options..., you could consider..., other choices to consider... |
| Control | Manage, self-manage, influence, discuss how diabetes impacts the individual’s life overall |
| Poorly controlled, poor control, good control, well controlled | Blood sugar levels that are: stable, within the target range |
| Failed, failing | Has not, was not able to, this time didn’t, lacked capacity or support to... |

For people that would like to know more, [Language Matters: A Diabetes Canada Consensus Statement](#) provides additional information about language use and diabetes.

Publication Date: April 2022

Cite As: Language Matters: Summary. Ottawa: Diabetes Canada; 2022.

For More Information: Please visit www.diabetes.ca

Contact: advocacy@diabetes.ca with inquiries about this Diabetes Canada position statement