

# HHCAHPS Communication Guidelines

The Home Health Care CAHPS (HHCAHPS) Survey, like all patient surveying, is meant to provide unbiased feedback from your patients about the care they experienced. To help ensure that all home health agencies are being rated fairly based on the care they provide, CMS has created guidelines for communicating with patients both verbally and in written form about the survey. In addition, CMS has provided guidelines for administering other surveys in conjunction with the HHCAHPS survey.

The following communication guidelines are included in the Home Health Care CAHPS Survey Protocols and Guidelines Manual and on the HHCAHPS web site.

## Communications with Patients about the HHCAHPS Survey

Because home health patients may be sicker and more vulnerable than other patient populations and they receive care from the home health provider in their homes, they may be more susceptible to actions that may influence their responses to the Home Health Care CAHPS Survey. Any information or communication about the survey from HHAs may introduce bias to the survey; therefore it is **not** acceptable for an HHA to do the following:

- Send or provide information to patients in advance alerting them about the survey;
- Provide a copy of the HHCAHPS Survey questionnaire or cover letters to the patients;
- Include words or phrases verbatim from the Home Health CAHPS (HHCAHPS) Survey in its marketing or promotional materials (CMS is encouraging HHAs not to use text from HHCAHPS questions in their marketing and promotional materials);
- Attempt to influence their patients' answers to the HHCAHPS Survey questions;
- Tell the patients that the agency hopes or expects that their patients will give them the best or highest rating;
- Offer incentives of any kind to the patients for participating (or not) in the survey;
- Help the patient answer the survey questions, even if the patient asks for the home care provider's help;
- Ask patients why they gave a certain response or rating to any of the HHCAHPS Survey questions; and
- Include any messages or materials promoting the HHA or the services it provides in survey materials, including mail survey cover letters and questionnaires and telephone interview scripts.

HHAs should never ask their patients if they would like to be included in the survey. All patients selected to participate in the HHCAHPS Survey being administered by mail mode can decide whether they wish to participate or not. Similarly, sampled patients included in the HHCAHPS Survey being administered by telephone mode can tell the interviewer if they choose not to participate in the survey.

## Alerting Patients about the HHCAHPS Survey

Medicare-certified home health agencies participating in the HHCAHPS Survey may inform **all** patients during the intake phase or in the agency's admission materials that they **may be contacted** and asked to respond to a patient experience survey. If this information is conveyed to all patients during the intake phase, this is acceptable. It is not acceptable, however, to send letters or otherwise contact patients to let them know that they have been selected for the HHCAHPS and that their responses would be appreciated. Nor is it acceptable for home health agency provider staff (skilled staff, aides, etc.) to engage in discussions with their patients about the HHCAHPS Survey. Home health agencies may not contact patients in advance to ask them if they want to participate in the survey.

For patients currently receiving care, including long-term patients, it is appropriate to inform them during their next scheduled assessment that they may be asked to respond to a patient experience survey.

As stated in the Protocols and Guidelines Manual, patients selected into the HHCAHPS Survey sample have the right to refuse when contacted via mail or telephone.

## Follow-up With HHCAHPS Survey Respondents

Patients receiving the HHCAHPS Survey have the right to voluntarily choose to participate in the survey. They also have the right to answer the questions in the HHCAHPS Survey based on their own perception of the care that they receive, and to express opinions freely and without fear of later repercussions or threat of perceived repercussions from their health care providers.

Although HHCAHPS survey vendors may share a patient's individual responses to the HHCAHPS Survey with the patient's home health agency *provided that the respondent has given permission*, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the HHCAHPS Coordination Team provide the following guidelines on how agencies may use the data provided:

Home health agencies **are not permitted to contact** HHCAHPS Survey respondents to ask them about their answers to the HHCAHPS Survey **unless** one of the two conditions described below applies. This means that an agency cannot ask a patient for the reasons he or she responded to HHCAHPS Survey questions in a certain way, especially if the respondent's answer to a question is not the most favorable or most positive response.

Home health agencies may use survey responses linked to information that identifies a patient to aid in the agency's quality improvement efforts, including identifying a specific home care provider who may not be performing as expected. The other intent of providing a patient's survey response information is to enable the home health agency to follow up with a patient if one of the following situations or conditions applies.

- The respondent reports that there have been instances of negligence, abuse, or harm to the patient; and/or
- The respondent reports that the agency's home health care provider specifically did something that the respondent perceives as jeopardizing the patient's health and/or well-being.

## Administering HHCAHPS in Conjunction With Other Surveys

Some home health agencies may wish to conduct other patient surveys to support internal quality improvement activities. A "survey" is defined as a formal, HHCAHPS-like, patient experience/satisfaction survey. A formal survey, regardless of the data collection mode employed, is one in which the primary goal is to ask standardized questions of a sample of the HHA's patient population. Contacting patients to assess their care at any time or calling a patient to check on services received are both considered to be routine patient contacts, not surveys.

To ensure that valid data are collected on HHCAHPS and that the data collected represent patients' perspectives of the home health care they receive, HHAs should use the following guidelines when administering other surveys in conjunction with HHCAHPS:

- For each sample month, the Home Health Care CAHPS Survey *sample* must be selected prior to selecting the samples for any other home health agency survey.
- In other surveys that a home health agency conducts, the agency can include questions that ask for more in-depth information about HHCAHPS issues, but should not repeat the HHCAHPS questions or include questions that are very similar.