

Preparing a Questionnaire Using the CAHPS® In-Center Hemodialysis Survey

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This document explains how to use the CAHPS In-Center Hemodialysis Survey core and supplemental items to construct an instrument that meets your needs. It focuses on steps you can take when preparing a questionnaire to ensure that it is consistent with the project's objectives and will generate useful information. These steps include—

- Incorporating supplemental questions
- Formatting the questionnaire
- Translating the questionnaire

Incorporating Supplemental Questions

Core Items

The questionnaire includes core items and supplemental items. **Core items** are questions that are **included in every questionnaire** to ensure standardization and comparability; they are applicable across different kinds of facilities and patient populations.

Supplemental Items

Sponsors that field the CAHPS In-Center Hemodialysis Survey are free to customize the questionnaire to meet the unique needs of their organizations, local markets, and/or audiences. To support that kind of customization, the questionnaire includes a unique set of optional **supplemental items** that may be added to the core items. These supplemental sets can be found after the initial core items in the survey document; they include instructions on where to place each supplemental item relative to the core items.

The supplemental items address issues of interest for certain facilities and audiences. Some cover events that occur with low frequency in the general population. You should include them only if your sample design is likely to yield at least the minimum number of responses recommended for analysis of that question.

You also have the option of adding your own items to the core questionnaire.

Placement of Supplemental Items

The general rule is to insert items in the relevant topic sections within the core questionnaire. Grouping all items (core and supplemental) by topic minimizes the cognitive burden on respondents, as well as the likelihood of recall or reporting error. However, before adding the CAHPS supplemental items to the questionnaire, please refer to the guidance in the supplemental set document regarding proper item placement. These instructions were designed to ensure that the supplemental items do not interfere with the flow of the core items.

If you plan to add your own questions, append them at the end of an existing section or add a new section before the “About You” section. Adding new items prior to core items creates a different context around the core items and may influence responses to the core items.

Whenever you add items, be sure to—

- Renumber all items in the questionnaire so that the supplemental items look like the core items.
- Check the skip instructions in all items to ensure that respondents are directed to the appropriate next question.

Concerns About Questionnaire Length

If you choose to add either supplemental items or your own items, pay attention to the length of the questionnaire. The longer the questionnaire, the greater the burden on the respondent. That said, research by the CAHPS grantees indicates that, up to a point, survey length has little impact on response rates.¹

Formatting the Questionnaire

The CAHPS Team strongly recommends taking steps to maximize the visual appeal and readability of your questionnaire. A well-formatted questionnaire contributes to response rates, completion rates, and the accuracy of responses.

The self-administered mail questionnaires available in the Survey and Reporting Kit are explicitly designed to be easy to read. Important elements include the two-column format, the use of white space, and the font size and type (12-point Times New Roman). The guidelines below list the Consortium’s formatting recommendations for the survey. We recommend that you retain these elements if you add supplemental items to your questionnaire.

¹ To learn more, go to: Gallagher PM, Fowler FJ. Notes from the field: experiments in influencing response rates from Medicaid enrollees. 2000 Proceedings, Data Quality Section. American Statistical Association; Alexandria, VA; 971-6.

Also, see the FAQs on the CAHPS Web site:

https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/cahpsOverview/faqanswer.asp?faq_id=101&showanswer=1&viewall=¤t_cat_id=3&cat_id=&keyword=&hassub=#b_101

Guidelines for Questionnaire Formatting

Element	General Recommendation	Rationale
General		
Layout	2 columns with line separating columns	Makes survey navigation easier for respondents
Margins	Top & Bottom = 1 inch; Left & Right = .75 inch; Header = .5 inch; Footer = .4 inch	Makes navigation easier for respondents
Section Headings		
Font Size	Should appear slightly larger than item text. Use 13 pt. as a guide (although font sizes can vary in actual size)	Minimum size necessary to ensure readability
Font style	Any sans serif font (e.g., Arial), title case, bold, with line above and line below to separate heading from item text	Provides contrast to serif font and style used for text
Spacing	Double space before box and single space after box	Provides white space around heading
Item Text		
Font size	Minimum 12 pt.	Minimum size necessary to ensure readability
Font style	Any serif font (e.g., Times New Roman)	Improves readability
Visual emphasis	Item number bold, item text not bold; bold to emphasize individual words (instead of underlining)	Improves readability, facilitates identification of key words in item
Spacing	Single space (plus 6 pts. at end of item)	Improves readability
Hanging indent and tab after item number	0.4 inch	Improves readability
Response Options		
Font size	Minimum 12 pt. (can use 12 pt. as a rough guide since size varies with style)	Minimum size required for readability
Font style	Any serif font (same as item font)	Improves readability
Spacing	Half line between item text and responses	Improves readability
Skip instructions	Bold	Emphasizes instruction to go to an item that is not sequential
Spacing between response and new item	Single plus additional 6 pts.	Improves readability
Indentation	Use vertical alignment of response options	Creates white space and improves readability
Precodes		
Use of precodes	Optional	Facilitates data entry
Location and style	Left of check box as superscript	De-emphasizes code for respondent
0-10 responses	Do not use precodes on 0-10 responses	Redundant with response options

Formatting the Front Cover

The front cover of the questionnaires in the Kit is designed to identify the questionnaire for sponsors and vendors, not for distribution to patients. The CAHPS Team recommends developing a customized cover that explains the purpose of the survey and identifies its sponsor. Be sure to include—

- The name of the survey sponsor.
- The sponsor's logo, if appropriate.
- A statement about the voluntary nature of the survey and the confidentiality of all responses. Please use or adapt the statement provided with the questionnaires.

Because appearances are important, use color as well as artwork to make the front cover of the questionnaire booklet attractive. Many commercial software applications (e.g., Word®, WordPerfect®, PowerPoint®) include “clip art” that you can easily and inexpensively incorporate into the design.

You can also use photographs to liven up the cover. However, pay attention to the photos you choose: Are the people in the photo representative of your survey population? Are the photos in the public domain? While these issues should be addressed, remember that efforts to make a questionnaire attractive and appealing to respondents should not overshadow the questions and instructions in the survey. It is important to strike a balance between appearance and utility.

Translating CAHPS Surveys Into Other Languages

To identify and reduce ethnic and racial disparities in health care, the CAHPS Consortium encourages survey sponsors to field foreign translations of the questionnaires that will assess the experiences of non-English speakers. The *CAHPS In-Center Hemodialysis Survey and Reporting Kit* includes Spanish translations of all core and supplemental items as well as associated materials, such as telephone scripts and notification letters.

For guidance on translating CAHPS surveys into other languages, visit https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/resources/CrossCultural/RES_CC_GuidelinesForTranslating.asp.