



Clinical Update

For Telephone Triage Nurses

July 2016

Page 1 of 2

In This Issue

Types of Questions

Open-Ended
Questions/Requests

Closed (Focused)
Questions

Questioning Errors

Tip for the Triager

End your call with the **open-ended** question: *“What other questions or concerns do you have today?”*

Asking the Right Questions at the Right Time

Gaining the caller’s trust and getting a clear picture of the caller’s symptoms and concerns are key first steps in the telephone triage encounter. These steps help assure that the nurse has the information needed to make sound triage recommendations and advice. Using open-ended questions as much as possible, especially at the beginning of a patient encounter, is an important component of effective patient-centered interviewing (Fortin, Dwamena, Frankel, & Smith, 2012). According to Espensen (2009) use of open-ended questions is “one of the most successful questioning strategies” (p. 51).

What is an Open-Ended Question (Request)?

Open-ended questions (or requests) encourage the caller to explain their concerns. They cannot be answered with a yes and no answer. Examples are:

- *“How can I assist you today?”*
- *“What are you most concerned about today?”*
- *“Please tell me more about your pain.”*
- *“Tell me about what your child has eaten and drank today.”*
- *“What is your child doing right now?”*

Why Are Open-Ended Questions So Important?

- Open-ended questions encourage the caller to explain their symptoms and concerns more freely and in their own words. This helps assure the triager has a more complete picture of the caller’s symptoms and does not miss any hidden concerns.
- By allowing the caller time to talk about their concerns, the triager communicates to the caller their concerns are important and heard. This conveys empathy and builds trust.

What are closed (focused questions)?

Closed or focused questions can be answered with “yes” or “no” or a specific answer such as a number, time, color, or size. The triager should use closed questions to clarify or gather further details about the caller’s symptoms or responses to open-ended questions. Focused questions are very appropriate when the triager needs to quickly assess symptoms in an emergency or high-risk situation. Examples of closed questions are:

- *“How many times did you throw-up?”*
- *“What time did you give the Tylenol?”*
- *“Have you been seen for this problem before?”*
- *“Are you having chest pain right now?”*

Clinical Update

For Telephone Triage Nurses

July 2016

Page 2 of 2



Questioning Errors

Two common types of questioning errors made during a telephone triage encounter (especially by novice triagers) are:

- ✓ Using closed (focused) questions too often and too early in the triage encounter
- ✓ Using closed questions that are potentially “leading”

Leading Questions

A leading question is a type of closed question that tends to encourage or lead a person to respond in a certain way. The unintentional result might be a response that is biased or inaccurate. Triage nurses must learn to recognize and avoid questions that are potentially leading.

Potential Leading Questions	Better Question Options
<i>Are you feeling a little better since you started the antibiotic a few days ago?</i>	<i>Tell me about how things have been going since the antibiotic was started? Is your (symptom) better, worse, or the same since you started the antibiotic?</i>
<i>Does your child look lethargic?</i>	<i>What is your child doing right now? How is your child acting?</i>
<i>Is your pain severe?</i>	<i>How would you rate your pain on a scale of 0 to 10? How bad is the pain?</i>
<i>Is your child getting enough fluids?</i>	<i>Tell me about what your child has had to drink since waking up this morning?</i>
<i>Are you taking your pain medicines as instructed?</i>	<i>What have you done so far to manage your pain? Tell me more about how you are using your pain medicines.</i>

Finding the Right Balance

A skillful triage nurse learns to find the right balance of open-ended and closed (focused) questions during the triage encounter. As a general rule, open-ended questions should be used as much as possible at the beginning of the call. A mix of open-ended and closed questions should be used during the middle and later part of the assessment. Using mainly closed (focused) questions is appropriate when the caller reports very serious or life-threatening symptoms (e.g., chest pain).



References:

Espensen, M.E. (Ed.) (2009). *Telehealth nursing practice essentials*. Pitman, New Jersey: American Academy of Ambulatory Nursing.

Fortin, A.H., Dwamena F.C., Frankel, R.M., & Smith, R.C. (Eds.). (2012) *Smith's patient-centered interviewing: an evidence-based method (3rd ed.)*. New York: McGraw Hill Medical.

Authors:
Jeanine Feirer, RN
David Thompson, MD

Copyright 2016.
Schmitt-Thompson
Clinical Content