

Challenging Questions

During your patient encounter, you may be asked some questions that catch you off guard. These questions may be about the patient's fears and concerns or may simply reflect the patient's curiosity. Such questions are intentionally included to assess your communication and counseling skills, as well as your concern for the patient.

The scenarios and challenging questions below can provide a good idea of the kinds of questions you may encounter in the examination. Keep in mind that although these cases are similar to those in the examination, you may be asked about a different case with a different challenging question. Your objective is to be familiar with these kinds of cases and questions rather than to simply memorize them.

Using the examples below as a guideline and not as a script will give you an idea of how to respond to such questions.

General tips

- Expect the unexpected and adapt to the best of your ability.
- Keep your composure and do not panic if you do not know the answer.
- To give yourself more time to think about a question (translation: stalling tactic), you can start by saying, "That's a very good question," and analyze the question as you speak.
- Always look confident and speak with conviction.
- Once you have answered the question to the best of your knowledge, make sure that the patient is satisfied with your reply.
 - Ask, "Did I address that particular concern or question of yours?" or "Do you have any more questions?"

Patients who want a diagnosis or medical opinion

- Some patients may ask for a diagnosis or your "expert opinion" during the encounter. Just answer the question to the best of your knowledge.
- Explain why one diagnosis is more likely than others. If you are not sure about the diagnosis, don't panic.
- Calmly explain that there are several causes that could be responsible for symptoms and that further investigation is required.
- Make sure the patient has an adequate support system before giving a definite life-altering diagnosis.

Demented patient

- **Patient:** "Do I have Alzheimer's disease?"
- **Response**
 - "Alzheimer's disease is certainly a possibility. However, there are also other conditions that can cause memory difficulties, such as thyroid problems or vitamin deficiencies."
 - "We need to first do some blood tests and then I can give you a better

	idea of what may be going on.”
Patient with suspected HIV (eg, fever, chronic diarrhea, weight loss)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think I have HIV?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ "You do have some risk factors for HIV, which can cause some of your symptoms." ◦ "However, there are other treatable conditions that may cause these symptoms." ◦ "We need to do some blood tests, including an HIV test, before meeting again to discuss the results."
Chest pain patient with suspected pericarditis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Am I having a heart attack? Am I going to die?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Your symptoms and physical examination findings don't suggest a heart attack.” ◦ “Your symptoms are more consistent with inflammation of the heart membranes.” ◦ “We need to do some blood tests, an ECG, and possibly an echocardiogram.”
Patient with weakness or numbness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think I've had a stroke?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “At this point, I don't know the exact cause of your symptoms.” ◦ “A stroke is a possibility, but there could also be other causes such as a pinched nerve, infection, spinal injury, etc.” ◦ “I need to order some blood work and imaging studies before I can tell you for sure.”
Elderly patient with constipation and significant family history of colon cancer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think this is colon cancer?” or “Do you think I'll get colon cancer too?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Your family history does increase your chance of colon cancer, but constipation can also be due to medication side effects, thyroid problems, etc.” ◦ “I want to do a very thorough investigation with blood work and imaging studies before discussing diagnosis and treatment options.”
Elderly patient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think I'm just getting old?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Age could play an important role in decreased sexual function.”

<p>with erectile dysfunction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “However, there are also certain reversible causes that could be causing your problem such as medications, diabetes, and high blood pressure.” ○ “I would first like to do some blood tests to rule these out and then discuss treatment options with you.”
<p>Acute appendicitis patient</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think I need surgery?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “I understand you might be anxious or scared about possible surgery, just like most patients.” ○ “I cannot be sure yet that you will need surgery.” ○ “I would first like to order some blood tests and imaging studies to evaluate you further and we can then discuss treatment options.”
<p>Chronic back pain patient</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think I need surgery?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “I’ll need to order some imaging tests first to see what is causing your back pain.” ○ “If it can be treated using medication, we will give you pain medication first.” ○ “Otherwise, surgery may be an option.”
<p>Pregnant patient with vaginal bleeding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think I’m going to lose my baby?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Losing your baby can cause bleeding, but there are many causes of vaginal bleeding in a pregnant patient.” ○ “I will need to do some blood tests and imaging to see what is causing the bleeding.”
<p>Patient with palpitations and a family history of thyroid problems</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “What’s causing this? Is it my thyroid?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Thyroid problems can cause palpitations in addition to other conditions such as heart disease.” ○ “I’ll need to run some tests first before discussing your diagnosis and treatment options.”

<p>Sensitive issues</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some patients may have concerns that prevent access to adequate health care such as financial constraints, confidentiality issues, personal fears, etc. 	

- Express empathy for the patient regardless of how trivial the issue may seem.
- Healthcare promotion is more effective with adequate doctor and patient satisfaction.

<p>HIV patient</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Should I tell my wife? I'm scared.” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “It can be very uncomfortable and difficult to discuss your medical condition.” ◦ “It's usually better to tell the truth since your wife may also be infected with HIV and needs testing.” ◦ “If you'd like, I can help you with the process of informing and testing her.”
<p>Acute appendicitis patient</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “I don't have insurance and can't afford an operation. Do I really need surgery? Are there other options?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “I understand your concerns, but surgery is really the best option for your condition.” ◦ “The hospital has a social worker who can see what financial assistance the hospital can offer you.”
<p>Patient needing extensive laboratory workup or diagnostic procedures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think my insurance will cover these expenses?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “I'm not sure if it will or not since I don't have that information right now.” ◦ “However, our social worker can help evaluate your situation.” ◦ “I can also write a letter to your insurance company describing the procedure and its importance to your health to see if it will cover the costs.”
<p>STD patient with a single sexual partner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Do you think my partner is cheating on me?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Since the disease is transmitted sexually, the most likely possibility is from your sexual partner.” ◦ “It's a possibility that your partner obtained it from somebody else. It would be best if you both discuss this further.” ◦ “I would like your partner to also get treated to prevent reinfection.”
<p>Patient with chronic fatigue</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Will I ever get better?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Your problem could be due to many causes such as a thyroid

and nonspecific pain	<p>problem, anemia, etc.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “I need to first investigate with blood work to rule out possible causes before going over treatment options.” ○ “We will then see how you do from there.”
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Medication issues

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardized patients sometimes ask about medications, their proper use, and side effects. • It is important that you answer these questions confidently and with conviction. • If you are not sure, inform patients that you will look up the information and let them know. |
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Elderly patient with chronic osteoarthritis of the knee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “I’m tired of this medication. I want to switch to an herbal medication.” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Chronic pain can be very frustrating, and I understand that you are not happy with your current treatment.” ○ “Herbal medications may help some people, but the studies are somewhat limited.” ○ “I will look at some of these studies and get back to you after reviewing them.”
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Menopausal patient with hot flashes and strong family history of breast cancer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Can I go on hormone replacement therapy?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “You’re certainly a candidate for hormone replacement therapy, since HRT is indicated for the treatment of hot flashes.” ○ “However, HRT may increase your risk of breast cancer.”
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Patients with apparent viral upper respiratory tract infection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “I’ve had this before. Can’t you just give me antibiotics?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Your symptoms and examination are more consistent with a likely viral infection.” ○ “Antibiotics treat bacterial infections and are not effective against viruses.” ○ “Giving antibiotics repeatedly for viral infections may lead to increased resistance to the drugs in the future.” ○ “Antibiotics can also cause side effects such as diarrhea and nausea.”
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Explaining medical jargon

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- It is best to avoid using medical jargon while talking to the patient.
- Medical jargon creates a feeling of alienation or unfamiliarity and can distance you from the patient.
- If you accidentally use a medical word, explain it in simple terms.

<p>Patient in need of colonoscopy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “A colonoscopy? What's that?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “A colonoscopy involves placing a tube with a camera from below (in the rectum) to take a look at the whole intestine on a television screen.” ◦ “If there are any growths, called polyps, they can be cut out and examined under a microscope.”
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Difficult patients

- These patients may be angry, demanding, or very impatient and prevent you from having an effective and meaningful interaction.
- Do not disregard these statements/questions even though they may be annoying.
- Always try to resolve the situation first (ie, calm the patient down) in order to effectively discuss the medical problem.

<p>Patient with acute abdominal pain</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “Stop asking me these stupid questions. I'm in pain, so just give me pain medications.” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “I understand that you're in a lot of pain right now.” ◦ “However, I need to ask you a few questions first and quickly examine you to get a better idea of what is going on.” ◦ “I can then decide which therapy is best to decrease your pain.”
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<p>Demanding patient</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient: “I've been waiting for a long time. What took you so long?” • Response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “I'm very sorry that you had to wait so long.” ◦ “I had some complications with my other patients that took longer than expected to treat.” ◦ “Let's discuss what is going on and I'll try to help you as much as I can.”
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