

Breast cancer patients remember more information if doctors show empathy

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Patients with incurable breast cancer remember more information about their treatment if their doctor is more empathic during consultations.

These are the results of research by psychologists from Leiden University in collaboration with Nivel research institute. Publication in Patient Education and Counseling.

Patients with an [incurable disease](#) have a lot of [information](#) to remember from each consultation with their doctor. "But we know from previous research that this isn't easy," says psychologist Liesbeth van Vliet from the Department of Health, Medical and Neuropsychology at Leiden University. Patients recall only 20 to 60% of the information that the doctor tells them. This is thought to be because the consultation causes stress.

Patient consultations

Van Vliet knew from other studies that empathy can reduce stress and anxiety. Together with her colleagues and researchers from Nivel research institute, she therefore looked at whether, in a [clinical setting](#), empathy influences the amount of information [patients](#) recall. She recorded 41 consultations between patients and their doctors—having first secured their consent. When they arrived home, the patients completed a questionnaire on what the doctor had told them. "By comparing the questionnaire with the audio recording of the consultation, we could determine how much of the information the patient could remember." The researchers used the audio recording to score the doctor's level of empathy.

Increased patient recall

"We discovered that if a doctor had shown the patient more empathy, the patient's information recall increased significantly. And this was mainly information about the treatment aims or intended positive effects," said Van Vliet. Surprisingly enough, Van Vliet and her

colleagues found no link between a more empathetic approach and reduced anxiety. "So we don't yet know the underlying mechanism that means empathy has this effect."

Importance of empathy

The research, says Van Vliet, demonstrates the power of empathy. "It is really important that doctors show [empathy](#), not just because patients feel better for it but also helps them retain the information that the doctor has provided, which is really important, particularly now patients are increasingly expected to make treatment decisions."

More information: Janine Westendorp et al. The power of clinician-expressed empathy to increase information recall in advanced breast cancer care: an observational study in clinical care, exploring the mediating role of anxiety, *Patient Education and Counseling* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.pec.2020.10.025](#)

Provided by Leiden University

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