



# How can we communicate risk clearly in health information?

## The problem

- What is a person’s risk of developing a particular condition?
- What is the chance of a treatment working?
- What is the risk of getting different side-effects?
- Can people change these risk factors?

Chances are rare

Communicating risks and statistics is an essential part of health information and supporting patients to play an active role in decisions about their health and care.

People who produce and provide health information have a vital job to support patients through the minefield of data and figures to help them feel confident in making their own decisions.

However, evidence suggests that too many health information materials do not fully address risk in a clear and understandable way.

Increase by 10%

## PIF’s project

The aim of the project was to develop best practice and share practical steps to support the producers and providers of health information to clearly communicate risk in a way patients and service users understand.

Between March 2014 and August 2015 we:

- Held three information gathering events with 100 health information professionals to understand the key challenges they and their service users faced.
- Conducted a literature review to identify the latest evidence on how to communicate risk clearly.
- Developed a series of best practice statement and key steps to support the clear communication of risk.
- Created a toolkit and factsheets to support health information professionals follow the best practice and key steps in their work.
- The outputs of the project have been shared with 2,500 people working in the field of health via the online toolkit.
- 60 health professionals attended a seminar in January 2016 where we shared the findings of the project and connected experts in the field of risk with health information professionals.

## As a result information producers will...

‘Increase the number of open questions we ask *[when user testing]* to check levels of understanding.’

‘Consider different ways to present statistics and think carefully about positive and negative framing when writing for a patient audience.’

‘Be more aware of challenges around communicating to patients who have low literacy levels.’

‘Reduce our use of percentages, not rely on numbers all the time and use pictures more.’

‘Look at how we describe risk numerically, and begin to use data visualisation.’

‘Think about reframing and using absolute risk more than relative risk.’

## What we learnt

Our project identified the following best practice principles to support the clear communication of risk in health information:

- User test your health information to ensure its risk messages are understood.
- Be cautious about using verbal descriptors of risk (rare, common). If used, ensure they are accompanied by statistical information.
- Use absolute risk rather than relative risk. For example, the risk of an event increases from 1 in 100 to 2 in 100, rather than the risk of the event doubles.
- Use natural numbers rather than percentages. For example, 10 in 100, rather than 10%.
- Consider using both positive and negative framing for risk. For example, include both the chance of getting a side-effect and chance of not getting it. How risk is described can have an enormous effect on how it is perceived.
- Communicate the uncertainty of data. Where there is uncertainty it should be reflected in your health information, using terms such as approximately, around, about if necessary.
- Consider using a mix of numerical and pictorial formats to communicate risk.
- Make risks relevant to your audience. Consider using examples, such as ‘this is the equivalent of one person in your street’. Give some context around statistics, for example how does this compare to risk of other diseases?



Are you more likely to agree to a treatment with a 97% chance of survival, or a 3% probability of dying?

## The toolkit

We published the best practice principles on a toolkit, along with the evidence behind the statements, and links to practical resources that will help information providers implement the best practice.

[www.pifonline.org.uk/toolkit](http://www.pifonline.org.uk/toolkit)

Across the UK, around 4 in 5 adults have a low level of numeracy

## About PIF

PIF is the UK network for people involved in the field of health information.

We are a non-profit organisation working to improve the quality and accessibility of health information for patients and public across the UK. Our work involves:

- Delivering guidance, resources and events for information producers.
- Influencing to raise the profile of health information.
- Bringing together those interested in the field of health information via the PIF network.