

Preparing a Questionnaire Using the CAHPS® Health Plan Survey 4.0

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Introduction

This document explains how to use the 4.0 version of the CAHPS Health Plan Survey questionnaires and supplemental items to construct an instrument that meets your needs. It focuses on three issues that you will need to address when preparing a questionnaire that is consistent with the sponsor's objectives for the project and will generate useful information. These issues are:

1. Incorporating supplemental questions.
2. Formatting the questionnaire.
3. Translating the questionnaire.

Incorporating Supplemental Questions

In the 4.0 version of the CAHPS Health Plan Survey, the commercial and Medicaid questionnaires contain core items only. **Core items** are questions that are included in every questionnaire to ensure standardization and comparability; they are applicable across populations, payers, and delivery systems. The only exception is the Child Medicaid Questionnaire, which also includes the CAHPS Item Set for Children with Chronic Conditions.

Aside from that item set, the differences between the 4.0 versions of the questionnaires are minimal:

- The only difference between the commercial and Medicaid questionnaires is the reference period, which has been modified to reflect the specific needs of the surveyed population: 12 months for commercial enrollees, 6 months for Medicaid enrollees.
- The primary difference between the versions for adults and children is that the adult questionnaires ask respondents 18 and older about their own experiences, while the child questionnaires ask parents or guardians about the experiences of children 17 and younger. There are also some minor differences in the items in the "About You" section.

The 4.0 version of the Health Plan Survey was designed with a streamlined "core" to support a more modular approach to questionnaire preparation. Sponsors still benefit from the use of standardized items, but are free to customize the questionnaires to meet the unique needs of their organizations, local markets, and/or audiences. To support that kind of customization, this survey includes two sets of optional **supplemental items** that may be added to the core items:

- *CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0: Supplemental Items for the Adult Questionnaires* (Document No. 1157a and 1157b)

- *CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0: Supplemental Items for the Child Questionnaires* (Document No. 1158a and 1158b)

These documents include instructions on where to place each supplemental item in the core questionnaires.

These optional supplemental items address issues of interest for certain audiences, payers, or delivery systems, such as questions about maternity care or translation services. Many cover events that occur with lower frequency in the general population or services that are less likely to be covered by all plans. You should include them only if your sample design is likely to yield at least the minimum number of responses (i.e., 100 responses) recommended for analysis of that question.

You also have the option of adding your own items to the core questionnaire. If you plan to add your own questions, they should be appended at the end of an existing section or by adding a new section before the “About You” section.

Placement of Supplemental Items

Before placing supplemental items into the questionnaires, please refer to the guidance in the supplemental set document regarding proper item placement. In particular, do not assume that you can place items where they were in the 3.0 version of the questionnaires. The order of item sections has changed, so many of the items in the 4.0 version of the questionnaires now have different numbers. Also, item numbering across the commercial and Medicaid instruments is now consistent.

If you are placing your own items into the questionnaire, consider what aspect of care the items address, (e.g., general health care, care from a personal doctor, care from a specialist, the health plan), so that you insert the question at the end of an appropriate section.

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 to ensure that respondents are directed to the correct questions that follow.

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

¹ To learn more, see: 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; 971-976.

Collecting Information About Children with Chronic Conditions

In July 2007, the CAHPS Consortium released an updated version of the Medicaid questionnaire for children that includes a revised set of items for children with chronic conditions. The numbers are highlighted and numbered as CC1-CC38. If you want to field this set of items, simply remove the highlighting and renumber the items and skip instructions. If you are fielding the Child Commercial Questionnaire, you are also welcome to use this set of items by following the placement pattern shown in the Child Medicaid Questionnaire.

To learn more about this item set, download *About the Item Set for Children with Chronic Conditions* (Document No. 102):

https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/products/pdf/102_Children_with_Chronic_Conditions_Set.pdf.

Recreating the Medicaid Questionnaires

In the 3.0 version of the Health Plan Survey, there were two versions of the Medicaid questionnaires: one for enrollees in managed care plans and another for those in fee-for-service programs. There is only one Medicaid questionnaire in the 4.0 survey. Also, some of the items that had been unique to the Medicaid questionnaires were moved into the 4.0 supplemental set of items as part of the effort to develop a consistent and streamlined core questionnaire and to improve the ability of sponsors to customize the instrument.

You can recreate previous versions of the Medicaid instrument by adding back items from the 3.0 version that were moved into the 4.0 supplemental set. **Tables 1 and 2** in the appendix show where those items are in the supplemental sets for adults and children; please note that these tables do not list all supplemental items that may be relevant to the Medicaid population, but only those that were specifically designed for Medicaid respondents.

HEDIS® Items

Health plans seeking accreditation from the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) or providing Health Plan Employer Data and Information Set (HEDIS) measures for reporting purposes submit results of a modified version of the CAHPS Health Plan Survey known as CAHPS 4.0H. The items that have been added to that version of the survey are available in the supplemental set for those sponsors who wish to add them to their own questionnaires. To see how CAHPS 4.0H corresponds to the core CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0, see **Table 3** in the Appendix. Note that some items from the HEDIS set are also listed under other topic headings, such as Claims Processing.

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 (for items, a 12-point sans serif font, e.g., 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.

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 = 0.75 inch; Header = 0.5 inch; Footer = 0.4 inch	Maximizes white space to make 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

Element	General recommendation	Rationale
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 points	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 health plan enrollees. 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, we encourage survey sponsors to field foreign translations of the questionnaires that will assess the experiences of non-English speakers. The *CAHPS Health Plan Survey and Reporting Kit 2008* includes Spanish translations of all instruments and supplemental items as well as associated materials, such as sample 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.

Appendix

Table 1. Location of 3.0 Adult Medicaid Items in the 4.0 Supplemental Item Set..... 8
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Table 1. Location of 3.0 Adult Medicaid Items in the 4.0 Supplemental Item Set

	Item Number		
	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 3.0	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 3.0
	Adult Supplemental Items	Adult Medicaid Managed Care Questionnaire	Adult Medicaid Fee-for-Service Questionnaire
How often you had a hard time speaking with/understanding doctors because they spoke different languages	C1	29	29
Needed interpreter to speak with doctors	I1	34	34
When you needed interpreter, how often got one	I2	35	35
State pays health plans to care for people covered by Medicaid/health plan like this	ME1	36	NA
Chose your own health plan	ME2	37	NA
Got information about your health plan before signed up	ME3	38	NA
Information given correct	ME4	39	NA
Language spoken at home	I3	53	49

Table 2. Location of 3.0 Child Medicaid Items in the 4.0 Supplemental Item Set

Note: The supplemental set of items for children with chronic conditions that was incorporated into the 3.0 questionnaires is now available in the 4.0 version of the Child Medicaid Questionnaire.

	Item Number		
	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 3.0	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 3.0
	Child Supplemental Items	Child Medicaid Managed Care Questionnaire	Child Medicaid Fee-for-Service Questionnaire
How often the parent had a hard time speaking with/ understanding doctors because they spoke different languages	C1	33	33
How often child had a hard time speaking with/ understanding doctors because they spoke different languages	C2	37	37
Needed interpreter to speak with doctors	I1	53	53
When you needed interpreter, how often got one	I2	54	54
Child needed an interpreter to speak with doctors	I3	55	55
When child needed interpreter, how often got one	I4	56	56
Child 2 years or younger	WC1	57	57
Got reminders for checkup/shots/drops	WC2	58	58
Child been to doctor for checkup/ shots/drops	WC3	59	59
Got appointment for child's first doctor visit for checkup/shots/drops as soon as wanted/needed	WC4	60	60
State pays health plans to care for people covered by Medicaid/health plan like this	ME1	72	NA
Chose child's health plan	ME2	73	NA
Got information about your health plan before signed up	ME3	74	NA

	Item Number		
	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0 Child Supplemental Items	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 3.0 Child Medicaid Managed Care Questionnaire	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 3.0 Child Medicaid Fee-for-Service Questionnaire
Information given correct	ME4	75	NA
Language spoken at home	15	108	104
Language child speaks at home	16	109	105

Table 3. Comparison of the 4.0 and 4.0H Versions of the CAHPS Health Plan Survey (For Adults)

	Item Number	
	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0H
Covered by xx health plan	01	01
Fill in name of health plan	02	02
Had an injury, illness, or condition that needed care right away	03	03
Got care for illness/injury as soon as needed	04	04
Made any routine appointments at doctor's office or clinic	05	05
Got non-urgent appointment as soon as needed	06	06
Times visited doctor's office or clinic for care	07	07
Consumer and doctor talked about specific things to prevent illness	H1	08
Doctor/provider told consumer there were more than one choice for treatment/care	H2	09
Doctor/provider discussed pros & cons of each choice for treatment/care	H3	10
Doctor/provider asked consumer which treatment/care choice was best for them	H4	11
Rating of all health care	08	12
Have a personal doctor	09	13
Times visited personal doctor for care	10	14
Doctor explained things clearly	11	15
Doctor listened carefully	12	16
Doctor respected your comments	13	17
Doctor spent enough time	14	18
Got care from doctor/provider other than personal doctor	H5	19
Doctor seemed informed and up-to-date about care received from other doctors/providers	H6	20

	Item Number	
	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0H
Rating of personal doctor	15	21
Made any appointments to see a specialist	16	22
How often was easy to see a specialist	17	23
Number of specialists seen	18	24
Rating of specialist	19	25
Tried to get care, tests, or treatment through health plan	20	26
How often was easy to get necessary care, tests, or treatment	21	27
Got written or Web-based information on how health plan works	H7	28
How often info provided needed information on how health plan works	H8	29
Looked for information from health plan on cost of health care service or equipment	H9	30
Was able to find out from health plan cost of health care service or equipment	H10	31
Looked for information from health plan on cost of specific prescription medications	H11	32
Was able to find out from health plan cost of specific prescription medications	H12	33
Tried to get information/help from health plan's customer service	22	34
Customer service gave necessary information/help	23	35
Customer service staff courteous and respectful	24	36
Health plan gave consumer forms to fill out	25	37
Forms easy to fill out	26	38
Sent health plan claims for health care	H13	39
How often health plan handled claims quickly	H14	40
How often health plan handled claims correctly	H15	41

	Item Number	
	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0	CAHPS Health Plan Survey 4.0H
Rating of health plan	27	42
Rating of overall health	28	43
Had a flu shot since Sept 1, 2006	H16	44
Currently smoke every day, some days or not at all	H17	45
Number of visits consumer was advised to quit smoking	H18	46
Number of visits medication was recommended/discussed to help consumer quit smoking	H19	47
Number of visits doctor or provider discussed methods and strategies for quitting smoking with consumer	H20	48
Has consumer seen doctor or provider 3 or more times for same condition or problem	29	49
Has condition lasted for at least 3 months	30	50
Consumer needs or takes prescription medicine	31	51
Medicine for condition that lasted for at least 3 months	32	52
Age	33	53
Male or female	34	54
Highest grade level completed	35	55
Hispanic or Latino	36	56
Describe race	37	57
Received help completing survey	38	58
How that person helped you	39	59