

WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE THE ANSWER YET

What to say when you need more information, more time, or another professional opinion

Not every responsible answer can be given immediately. This guide helps you respond without guessing, hiding, overexplaining, or surrendering the patient's confidence.



AN IMMEDIATE ANSWER IS NOT ALWAYS AN ACCURATE ONE

Patients ask direct questions. The room gets quiet. An assistant may be listening. You can feel the expectation to sound certain before you have enough information to be certain.

You do not owe an instant answer. You do owe an honest next step.

WHY THE ANSWER MAY NOT BE READY

1

THE INFORMATION IS INCOMPLETE

The examination, images, history, records, or response over time may not yet support a reliable conclusion.

2

THE QUESTION IS BROADER THAN IT SOUNDS

A patient may ask for certainty about prognosis, timing, cost, or outcome when several variables remain unresolved.

3

SOMETHING CHANGED

A new finding or unexpected response may require you to reassess rather than repeat the answer you expected to give.

4

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE IS APPROPRIATE

The question may sit outside your current experience or benefit from input from a relevant clinician.

5

YOU FEEL EXPOSED

Sometimes the facts are clear enough, but fear of being judged makes your language disappear.

Needing to verify an answer is not the same as having no professional judgment. The judgment may be recognizing what the available information cannot support yet.

MAKE THE UNCERTAINTY SPECIFIC

'I don't know' can feel enormous until you identify exactly what is known, what is missing, and what must happen next.

1

WHAT IS THE PATIENT ACTUALLY ASKING?

Listen for the real question beneath the wording: What is happening? Is this urgent? What are my options? What can you promise? What happens next?

2

WHAT CAN YOU STATE FROM THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE?

Separate findings and reasonable conclusions from assumptions, predictions, or pressure to reassure.

3

WHAT IS STILL UNKNOWN?

Name the missing record, examination, response, consultation, or decision that prevents a complete answer.

4

WHAT IS THE NEXT RESPONSIBLE STEP?

Decide what needs to be reviewed, obtained, discussed, monitored, or referred before the question can be answered more fully.

The goal is not to eliminate uncertainty before you speak.

The goal is to communicate the boundary of the current information without turning that boundary into panic, vagueness, or false certainty.

LANGUAGE THAT PROTECTS ACCURACY AND TRUST

These are starting points, not scripts to recite. Adapt the language to the facts, your scope, the patient's question, and the next step you can actually provide.

WHEN YOU NEED TO REVIEW

I want to give you an accurate answer. I need to review ___ before I answer that fully.

WHEN PART OF THE ANSWER IS CLEAR

Based on what I can see today, ___. What I cannot determine yet is ___.

WHEN YOU NEED TO VERIFY

I do not want to guess. Let me verify that and come back to you with a clear answer.

WHEN ANOTHER OPINION IS APPROPRIATE

This is a situation where another professional opinion would be useful before we decide what comes next.

WHEN THE PATIENT ASKS FOR A PROMISE

I can explain what we know now. I also want to be careful not to promise what the available information cannot support.

Do not hide the limit. Do not dramatize it. State what you know, identify what you need, and give the patient a next step you can honor.

IF THE ANSWER COMES LATER, CLOSE THE GAP

A delayed answer can still build trust. A vague promise that disappears usually does not.

1

RECORD THE EXACT QUESTION

Do not rely on remembering the general subject after the day becomes busy.

2

NAME WHAT YOU ARE CHECKING

The patient should understand why the answer is not complete yet without receiving a lecture.

3

DEFINE THE NEXT CONTACT

Be clear about who will follow up and what must occur before that follow-up can happen.

4

RETURN WITH AN ANSWER THAT MATCHES THE EVIDENCE

Do not let embarrassment pressure you into sounding more certain the second time.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE CONVERSATION

- ☐ Have I said what is known without overstating it?
- ☐ Have I named what is still missing?
- ☐ Does the patient know what happens next?
- ☐ Have I avoided making a promise I may not be able to keep?

A short guide can give you language and a place to start. It cannot see your schedule, hear your conversations, or weigh the trade-offs in your position. Without context, even good advice stays generic.

For a deeper dive, explore the New DDS Unfiltered Digital Library or work directly with Dr. K.

NewDDSUnfiltered.com

Professional note: This guide is for general education and communication reflection. It does not replace individualized clinical, legal, ethical, or risk-management guidance.