

Vital signs and monitoring

by Marie McCullagh & Ros Wright

Mrs Medway, 55, arrives by ambulance to the Emergency department of her local hospital complaining of chest pains and shortness of breath. She appears to be very anxious. Andrew, a newly qualified staff nurse, is sent to the cubicle to take the patient's vital signs.

Transcript

Nurse: You seem a little breathless, Mrs Medway. Are you comfortable there or would you like me to get you another pillow?

Mrs Medway: No, no, I'm okay thanks. I'm really worried about these pains in my chest.

Nurse: I can understand you might be worried. Dr Kiani's on today, she'll be able to go through the results once we've carried out a few more tests. I need to take your temperature now. Can I put this under your tongue please? Great, 37.2, that's fine. Now I need to take your pulse as well, if that's okay?

Mrs Medway: That's fine.

Nurse: I'm just going to rest your hand on your chest here, so it's more comfortable while I take your pulse.

Mrs Medway: Okay.

Nurse: It's 80. That's fine. You'll have an ECG later on, so that just leaves your blood pressure. Have you had this done before?

Mrs Medway: Not for a while, no.

Nurse: Okay, if you can just take off your jacket and roll up your sleeve for me ... as far as it will go ... that'll do. I'll explain what I'm doing as we go along; people tend to feel better when they know what to expect. I'm going to ask you to place your arm on the pillow first, and then I want you to relax and just breathe normally. Now, if I can wrap this cuff around your arm ... That's it. Now I'll just pump it up a little. You won't feel any discomfort, just a little pressure to the arm. Okay so far?

Mrs Medway: Fine.

Nurse: I'll just have a listen while I release the pressure. Okay, that's one thirty five over ninety.

Mrs Medway: What does that mean?

Nurse: Well, it is a little higher than I would have thought. It could be due to your anxiety, which is understandable. If you don't mind though, I think I'll take a second reading, just to be sure. Can you give me your other arm please? Now, I need you to relax as much as possible. Good. All done. There's a slight decrease there, a hundred and thirty over eighty five, but it's still a little higher than normal.

Mrs Medway: What's normal, then?

Nurse: It varies, but normal blood pressure is generally below one hundred and twenty over eighty. Now, Nurse Stevens will be over in a minute to take a blood sample for the lab.

Mrs Medway: Oh. I was hoping I was going to escape that one.



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Nurse: Oh really?

Mrs Medway: I've a real phobia where blood's concerned – bit of a baby, I'm afraid.

Nurse: There's nothing to be embarrassed about Mrs Medway, you'll be surprised how many people feel the same. I'll let my colleague know so she can take the necessary precautions.

Mrs Medway: You're very understanding, thanks.

Nurse: Dr Kiani has asked us to keep an eye on you for the next few hours or so.

Four hours later

Nurse: How are you feeling, Mrs Medway?

Mrs Medway: Much better nurse, thanks. I think I had a bit of a panic earlier, but I'm feeling much more relaxed now.

Nurse: Well, the good news is that your pulse has stabilized and your blood pressure is down on when you first came in. It was gradual, which is a good sign, too. Dr Kiani will be back to see you in a while to explain your ECG results and talk about where we go from here.

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A Professional usage

- Before you listen, write down the normal temperature and pulse readings you would expect to find in an adult patient.
- Now listen to the dialogue and tick any of the vital signs that the nurse refers to.
- Listen again and note the results that the nurse records.

Check	✓
Temperature	
Pulse	
Blood pressure	
Respiratory rate	

Vital signs	
Temperature	
Pulse	
Blood pressure (first and second readings)	
Respiratory rate	

- Now answer these questions:

- Is there any indication that the nurse has measured the patient's respiratory rate?
- Has the patient had her blood pressure taken before?
- Why does the patient describe herself as a 'bit of a baby'?

B Colloquial language

- Each of the phrases below has been underlined in the dialogue. Look at the phrase in context and suggest a more formal word or phrase which could be used instead.
 - bit of* _____
 - keep an eye on* _____
 - to be sure* _____
 - go through* _____

C Communication focus

- Match the phrase used in the dialogue with the function on the right.

a. <i>Are you comfortable there, or would you like me to fetch you another pillow?</i>	asking permission
b. <i>I'm going to ask you to place your arm on the pillow first</i>	checking patient comfort
c. <i>If you don't mind though, I think I'll take a second reading</i>	explaining a result
d. <i>There's a slight decrease there</i>	explaining (steps of) a procedure

D Handover

In groups of two, role-play a nurse taking a patient's pulse and respiratory rate.

The student in the role of the patient should present with a symptom or symptoms of their choice. The nurse should report the patient's real rates and answer any questions that the patient may have. Make sure the following functions are covered using language from the dialogue where possible: asking permission, explaining a procedure, checking patient comfort and explaining a result.

Swap roles and role-play again.

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ANSWER KEY

A Professional usage

- Normal Temperature = 36.5–37.2
Normal Pulse = between 60 and 100 beats per minute

2. Check	✓
Temperature	✓
Pulse	✓
Blood pressure	✓
Respiratory rate	

3. Vital signs	
Temperature	37.2
Pulse	80
Blood pressure (first and second readings)	130/85 135/90
Respiratory rate	Not mentioned

- Yes she indicates she is putting her hand on her chest while taking her pulse.
 - Yes, a while ago.
 - Because she is frightened of having a blood sample taken.

B Colloquial language

- bit of → slight
 - keep an eye on → monitor
 - to be sure → to make certain
 - go through → explain / review

C Communication focus

- Are you comfortable there, or would you like me to fetch you another pillow?* – checking patient comfort
 - I'm going to ask you to place your arm on the pillow first* – explaining (steps of) a procedure
 - If you don't mind though, I think I'll take a second reading* – asking permission
 - There's a slight decrease there* – explaining results