

Pronouns

Tipsheet #2

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are the words we use to describe people when we don't use their name (for example, *we* and *their* are pronouns). People use pronouns all the time. The most common third-person pronouns are he, she, and they. Using the correct pronouns for people is an important part of how we show that we respect the person.

- She drinks her coffee black.
- He likes two sugars in his coffee.
- They prefer milk in their coffee.

In English, pronouns are commonly associated with gender. However, pronouns do not always tell us what gender someone is and reversely – knowing someone's gender does not always let us know what pronouns that person wants us to use for them.

Here is a [chart](#) of many common pronouns:

Subjective	Objective	Possessive adjective	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive	Pronunciation
She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself	Pronounced as it looks
He	Him	His	His	Himself	Pronounced as it looks
Ze	Zim	Zir	Zirs	Zirself	Pronounced as it looks
Sie/Zie	Hir	Hir	Hirs	Hirself	Pronounced: zee, here, here, heres, hereself
Zie	Zir	Zir	Zirs	Zirself	Pronounced: ze, zere, zere, zeres, zereself
Ey	Em	Eir	Eirs	Eirself	Pronounced: A, M, ear, ears, earself
Per	Per	Pers	Pers	Perself	Pronounced as it looks
Xe	Xem	Xyr	Xyrs	Xyrself	Pronounced: ze, zem, zere, zeres, zereself
They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves	Pronounced as it looks

Introducing yourself

The easiest way to learn someone's name and pronouns is by introducing yourself and then asking the person for theirs.

- “Hi, my name is Mary. I use they/them pronouns. What is your name and your pronouns?”
- “I’m James, the doctor who will be doing your exam. You can call me James or Dr. James, and I use he/him pronouns. What would you like me to call you? What pronouns should I use?”

Asking for pronouns and names

There may be times that you ask for someone's pronoun and name outside of introductions.

- “It is important to me that we treat everyone with respect. What name and pronouns would you like me to use for you?”
- “We ask everyone what they would like to be called, to ensure we are being respectful. What name and pronouns do you use?”
- “We have your legal name in our records. I want to check – is that the name you'd like me to call you or do you have another name or nickname?”

When someone doesn't know what you are asking

Not everyone will be familiar with sharing their pronouns. It is still important to ask. Here are some ways that you can clarify:

- “Pronouns are the words we use for people when we don't use their name – like she, they, or he. How do you like to be referred to?”
- “I ask everyone this to be sure I'm not making assumptions. Do you like to be referred to as she, he, they, ze, or something else?”

Asking when to use

Not all transgender or nonbinary people use their affirming pronouns (the pronouns that affirm their gender – the ones that feel right to them) in all situations. People may not be out to some people in their life or may not want their identity listed in their medical records. When working with a trans or nonbinary person it is important to check in on when and where to use their pronouns.

- “Are you comfortable with me using they pronouns for you in front of everyone?”
- “I typically list people’s pronouns in their chart so that others can get it right. Is that okay with you? Do you have any concerns with that which we can discuss?”
- “I know that your parents are here. Should I use these same pronouns in front of them?”

Being corrected

If you use the wrong name or pronouns for a person, you may be corrected (either by the person or someone else who notices). Many trans and nonbinary people experience misgendering frequently. They may sound angry, hurt, or frustrated when correcting you. They may also act like it’s no big deal. People have many different responses to misgendering, all of which are impacted by everything else going on in their lives.

No matter how you are corrected, it is important to accept the correction. Do your best to not respond in a defensive manner.

- “I apologize. Thank you for correcting me.”
- “I’m sorry. Mr. Ramirez. Thank you, I will try not to get it wrong again.”

Correcting yourself

If you notice that you made a mistake, correct yourself and move on. Demonstrating a change in behavior is one of the most effective apologies. Some people want to apologize repeatedly, but this can often be distracting or frustrating for the person.

- “I’m sorry, I meant ‘please get his records.’”
- “Correction, this is her paperwork. I apologize.”

Correcting others

You may find yourself correcting someone else. If you are in front of the patient, try to do so quickly and directly.

- “Mr. Ramirez uses he/him pronouns, not she/her.”
- “Myra goes by they/them. Please use those pronouns for them.”

If you are not in front of the patient, you may end up having a longer conversation with the person.

- “I noticed that you keep referring to Myra as she. They use they/them pronouns. I know you really want to show respect for them, and using their pronouns is part of that. Is there any way I can help you get this right?”



This tip sheet is part of a series focusing on medical advocacy.

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