

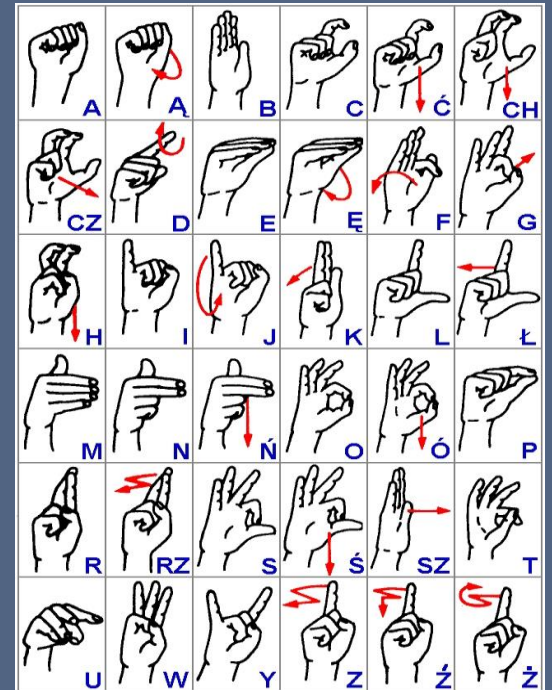
# Sign language in communication with the patient

Aleksandra Lisowska, Agnieszka Kraińska, Iwona Twardak

Division of Family and Pediatric Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Wrocław Medical University

**Sign languages** (also known as **signed languages**) are languages that use the visual-manual modality to convey meaning, instead of spoken words. Sign languages are expressed through manual articulation in combination with non-manual markers. Sign languages are full-fledged natural languages with their own grammar and lexicon.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing use a variety of ways to communicate. Some rely on sign language interpreters or assistive listening devices; some rely primarily on written messages. The method of communication and the services or aids the hospital must provide will vary depending upon the abilities of the person who is deaf or hard of hearing and on the complexity and nature of the communications that are required. Effective communication is particularly critical in health care settings where miscommunication may lead to misdiagnosis and improper or delayed medical treatment.



Polish Sign Language – alphabet

## Situations where an interpreter may be required for effective communication:

- discussing a patient's symptoms and medical condition, medications, and medical history
- explaining and describing medical conditions, tests, treatment options, medications, surgery and other procedures
- providing a diagnosis, prognosis, and recommendation for treatment
- obtaining informed consent for treatment
- communicating with a patient during treatment, testing procedures, and during physician's rounds
- providing instructions for medications, post-treatment activities, and follow-up treatments
- providing mental health services, including group or individual therapy, or counseling for patients and family members
- providing information about blood or organ donations
- explaining living wills and powers of attorney
- discussing complex billing or insurance matters
- making educational presentations, such as birthing and new parent classes, nutrition and weight management counseling, and CPR and first aid training

Sign language or other interpreters must be qualified. An interpreter is qualified if he or she can interpret competently, accurately, and impartially. In the hospital setting, the interpreter must be familiar with any specialized vocabulary used and must be able to interpret medical terms and concepts.

Hospital personnel who have a limited familiarity with sign language should interpret only in emergency situations for a brief time until a qualified interpreter can be present.

It is inappropriate to ask family members or other companions to interpret for a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. Family members may be unable to interpret accurately in the emotional situation that often exists in a medical emergency.

**Conclusion.** Individuals with hearing disabilities have different communication skills and the hospital should consult with each individual to determine what aids or services are necessary to provide effective communication in particular situations.