Best practices for using an interpreter with Indigenous language speakers:

- Do not assume that a patient speaks Spanish, even if they are from Latin America and speak a few words in Spanish.
- Request an interpreter who speaks a language variant from the patient’s municipality of origin within their home country.
- Speak directly to, and look at, the patient, not at the phone or at the interpreter. Do not say “tell the patient X.”
- Begin each consult by assuring the patient that their conversation will not be shared outside the consultation.

Keep in mind when working with Indigenous language speaking patients:

- Not all body parts or medical terms have specific translations into Indigenous languages. Even the word “health” may have different meanings.
- When talking about pain or discomfort in the patient’s body, point or touch the area to assure that you and the patient are talking about the same thing.
- Even with an interpreter, use the “teach-back” method to assure that the patient understands your recommendations.

Lessons from the community

They gave me written instructions in English and I had no way to ask questions after the visit.

The clinic visit was uncomfortable. The doctor assumed I spoke Spanish. When I said Tzotzil, they still spoke to me in Spanish.

When I said I speak Tzeltal, they got an interpreter to help on the phone.
These recommendations come directly from Indigenous patients and their multilingual interpreters from Guatemala and Mexico who speak variants of K'iche, Zapoteco, Mam, Tzeltzal, Q'anjob'al, and Nahuatl. They offered these recommendations to improve the patient experience of other Indigenous speakers.

- **K'iche speaker**: Providers need to help with the interpretation process by following best practices.
- **Q'anjob'al speaker**: Ask me to show you where I have pain or discomfort. Sometimes words can’t explain what I feel or the spot where I have a problem.
- **Mam speaker**: We have so much to learn from our Indigenous patients about how we can be more effective.
- **Mixteco Bajo speaker**: The doctor is in such a hurry and doesn’t listen to my questions. They need to schedule more time with those of us needing interpretation!
- **Nahuatl speaker**: Sometimes I’m uncomfortable talking about my woman’s health issues with male doctors or interpreters.
- **Mam speaker**: I like when the clinic send a Promotora to follow-up after my appointment. She speaks my language and is patient.
- **Tzeltzal speaker**: Give me visual notes to help me remember our conversation. My language is both written and oral, so images help.
- **Zapoteco speaker**: My language has many different variants. The interpreters should be from my same municipality so that I can understand.
- **Q'anjob'al speaker**: Ask me to show you where I have pain or discomfort. Sometimes words can’t explain what I feel or the spot where I have a problem.
- **Nahuatl speaker**: Some words, like “health / salud” do not have direct translations in my language.

This is the **tlatolli**, an Aztec symbol for the Nahuatl word that means “language” or “to speak.”