Why are the n sizes different for different questions?

When viewing the number of responses per question on a survey, you may notice that some questions have fewer responses than others. This difference results from 1) deliberate skip patterns in the survey that do not ask all patients exactly the same questions and/or 2) patients deciding they do not want to respond to a particular question.

Many surveys are designed with screening questions and skip patterns so patients are only asked questions that apply to their care. One example is the HCAHPS survey. Among several of the skip questions that the HCAHPS survey employs is, "During this hospital stay, did you need medicine for pain?" If the respondent says no, the medication questions are skipped. This accounts for various n sizes between the medication questions and those questions that are asked of all patients. This same type of skip question can be seen in other survey types. For example, some outpatient surveys may ask "Did you see a doctor during this outpatient visit?" If the respondent says no, the doctor questions would not be asked. Like the HCAHPS survey, this would account for the variance in n sizes among survey questions.

Another source of variance is the individual respondent and his or her level of comfort with a particular question. Occasionally, patients don't feel as though they can adequately answer a question so they ask to skip it. For instance, "How would you rate the explanation you received about what to expect during this procedure?" might be a question that respondents feel unable to answer if they can't remember receiving an explanation about what to expect. Therefore, the respondent may ask to skip the question rather than answer it.

Though some questions are skipped by design and others by a respondent's choice, PRC takes great pride in ensuring that patients feel comfortable answering survey questions. And because we wish to respect the respondent's desire in how they want to participate in the data collection, a variance in n size is almost always unavoidable.