Health Literacy and the Impact on Patient Care

2016
Objectives

1. Define literacy in the context of health communications
2. Describe health literacy’s impact on healthcare
3. Discuss potential red flags for low health literacy
4. Identify risk strategies and tools that practitioners can use in everyday practice to address health literacy deficits
Which is the strongest predictor of an individual’s health status?

- Age
- Income
- Employment status
- Education level
- Racial or ethnic group
- Literacy skills

What is health literacy?

“Health literacy is “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”

The prevalence of low health literacy

Among American adults:

• Just 12% are proficient in health literacy and able to use health information effectively
• More than 66% aged 60 or older have inadequate or marginal literacy skills
• Almost 9 out of 10 have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely available in healthcare facilities
• About 1 in 5 reads at the 5th-grade level or below
• Only 50% take medications as directed

# The impact of low health literacy

Low health literacy can impair your patients’ ability to understand:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions on prescription drug bottles</th>
<th>Appointment slips</th>
<th>Medical education brochures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal instructions about care</td>
<td>Mathematical concepts, such as probability and risk</td>
<td>The informed consent process and related forms</td>
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Research indicates that people who have low health literacy skills:

- Make more medication and treatment errors
- Are less compliant with treatment plans
- Are at a 50% increased risk of hospitalization
- Lack skills necessary to understand the health care system

Source: NPSF, Health literacy: Statistics at-a-glance
AMA Foundation health literacy video

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgTuD7i7LG8
Low health literacy red flags

- Trouble filling out required forms
- Problems articulating concerns or symptoms
- Inability to name medications or describe medication regimen
- Excuses, avoidance, or embarrassment
- Rudeness, hostility, or suspicious behavior
- Noncompliance with treatment plans or follow-up appointments
Case examples

An elderly woman discharged from the emergency department develops a life-threatening infection because she doesn't understand the warning signs listed in the discharge instructions.

A man baffled by an intake form in a doctor's office reflexively writes "no" to every question because he doesn't understand what is being asked.

The mother of a 2-year-old with an inner ear infection doesn't understand the label on the prescribed antibiotic. Instead of giving a teaspoon by mouth, she pours the medicine into the child’s infected ear.
Interacting with older adults

It is important to communicate with older patients in ways that are respectful and informative.

Risk strategies for verbal communication

Use layman’s language to explain medical terms (e.g., “high blood sugar” instead of “hyperglycemia”), and utilize visual aids to illustrate difficult concepts.

Allow time for questions and restate information as needed.

Ask open-ended questions. For example, “So, you’re having pain?” becomes “Can you tell me more about your pain?”

Use a technique such as “teach-back” to ensure patient comprehension.

Consider cultural beliefs and practices that may influence your interactions with patients.

Provide language access and assistive technologies, including interpreter services, to meet the needs of diverse patient communities.
Teach-back technique

“I want to be sure that I did a good job explaining your problem. Can you tell me . . .”

What your problem is?

What you need to do?

Why you need to do it?

Why you need to do it?
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Risk strategies for written communication</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure patient educational materials are written in plain language (4th–5th-grade reading level).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limit content to what patients really need to know. Put the most important information first.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present information in a logical order, group related information together, focus on one topic per paragraph, and use descriptive headings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use a font size of at least 12 points; avoid overuse of capitalization and italics, which are difficult to read.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use words that are well known to individuals without medical training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use examples and visual aids (e.g., illustrations or tables) to make complex material easier to understand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure that content is appropriate for the age and culture of the target audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize available plain language resources from the National Institutes of Health, the National Library of Medicine, and professional associations.</td>
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AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit

2nd edition

The AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit, 2nd edition, can help primary care practices reduce the complexity of health care, increase patient understanding of health information, and enhance support for patients of all health literacy levels.

What Are Health Literacy Universal Precautions?

Health literacy universal precautions are the steps that practices take when they assume that all patients may have difficulty comprehending health information and accessing health services. Health literacy universal precautions are aimed at—

- Simplifying communication with and confirming comprehension for all patients, so that the risk of miscommunication is minimized.
- Making the office environment and health care system easier to navigate.
- Supporting patients' efforts to improve their health.

Why Should Practices Implement Health Literacy Universal Precautions?

Experts recommend assuming that everyone may have difficulty understanding and creating an environment where all patients can thrive. Only 12 percent of U.S. adults have the health literacy skills needed to manage the demands of our complex health care system, and even these individuals' ability to absorb and use health information can be compromised by stress or illness. Like with blood safety, universal precautions should be taken to address health literacy because we can't know which patients are challenged by health care information and tasks at any given time.

Health literacy tools — ODPHP

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
Health Communication Activities

Health Literacy Improvement

Health Literacy is the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.

- **New** National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy
- **New** Health Literacy Online Guide

Tools for improving health literacy

- Sample Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy
- Quick Guide to Health Literacy
- Quick Guide to Health Literacy and Older Adults
- Toolkit for Trainers: Teaching Older Adults How to Find Health Information on the Internet
- PowerPoint Slides
- Health Literacy chapter in Communicating Health: Priorities and Strategies for Progress

Government resources

- AHRQ Health Literacy and Cultural Competency Web site
- HRSA Health Literacy Web page
- NIH Health Literacy Web sites
  - Clear Communication: an NIH Health Literacy Initiative
  - NLM’s Medline Plus: Health Literacy
  - National Library of Medicine Health Literacy Bibliography
  - National Library of Medicine’s Search & Health Literacy Information Resources
  - National Network of Libraries of Medicine: Health Literacy
- Office of Minority Health: Think Cultural Health
- Plain Language Web site
- Usability Web site
- NAL: Health Literacy Resource List for Educators March 2007 [PDF - 155 kb]

http://health.gov/communication/literacy/
Health literacy tools — plainlanguage.gov

Federal Plain Language Guidelines
March 2011 - Rev. 1, May 2011

Plain-Language Training
Training Resources

Popular Topics
Regulations
Health Literacy
Financial
Before-and-After

Plain Language – It’s the Law
Agency Requirements
Agency PL Webpage
PL in Federal Agencies

Tips & Tools
Starting a Plain-Language Program
Planning a Plain-Language Website

Examples Database (beta)
Examples

Site Highlights:
Designated Senior Officials and Agency Webpages
We are adding officials and webpage addresses as we get them. If we’re missing one, contact us and let us know.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services videos
Watch on YouTube (all links external)
Acronyms | Active Voice | Proofreading | Tables
Download video files
in Flash and Windows Media Player formats

What is Plain Language? | Why Plain Language?
Where do we use Plain Language?

http://www.plainlanguage.gov/
Health literacy tools — Office of Minority Health

Cultural and Linguistic Competency

NEW: Watch the Fundamentals of the National CLAS Standards webinar replay.

Culturally and linguistically appropriate services are respectful of and responsive to the health beliefs, practices and needs of diverse patients. The percentage of Americans who are racial and ethnic minorities and who speak a primary language other than English continues grow rapidly. Organizations are looking to meet the challenges of serving diverse communities and provide high quality services and care.

By tailoring services to an individual’s culture and language preference, health professionals can help bring about positive health outcomes for diverse populations.

Center for Linguistic and Cultural Competency in Health Care

Additional health literacy resources