

# Health Literacy and the Impact on Patient Care

2016

# Objectives



Define literacy in the context of health communications

Describe health literacy's impact on healthcare

Discuss potential red flags for low health literacy

Identify risk strategies and tools that practitioners can use in everyday practice to address health literacy deficits

# Do you know?

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?

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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

**Sources:** NPSF, *Health literacy: Statistics at-a-glance*; NPSF. (2016). *Leveling the challenges of health literacy with Ask Me 3*. Retrieved from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.npsf.org/resource/resmgr/AskMe3/AskMe3\\_HealthLiteracyTrainin.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.npsf.org/resource/resmgr/AskMe3/AskMe3_HealthLiteracyTrainin.pdf); Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (n.d.). *Fact sheet: Health literacy basics*. Retrieved from <http://health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsbasic.htm#six>



# The impact of low health literacy

**Low health literacy can impair your patients' ability to understand:**

Instructions on  
prescription drug  
bottles

Appointment slips

Medical education  
brochures

Verbal instructions  
about care

Mathematical  
concepts, such as  
probability and risk

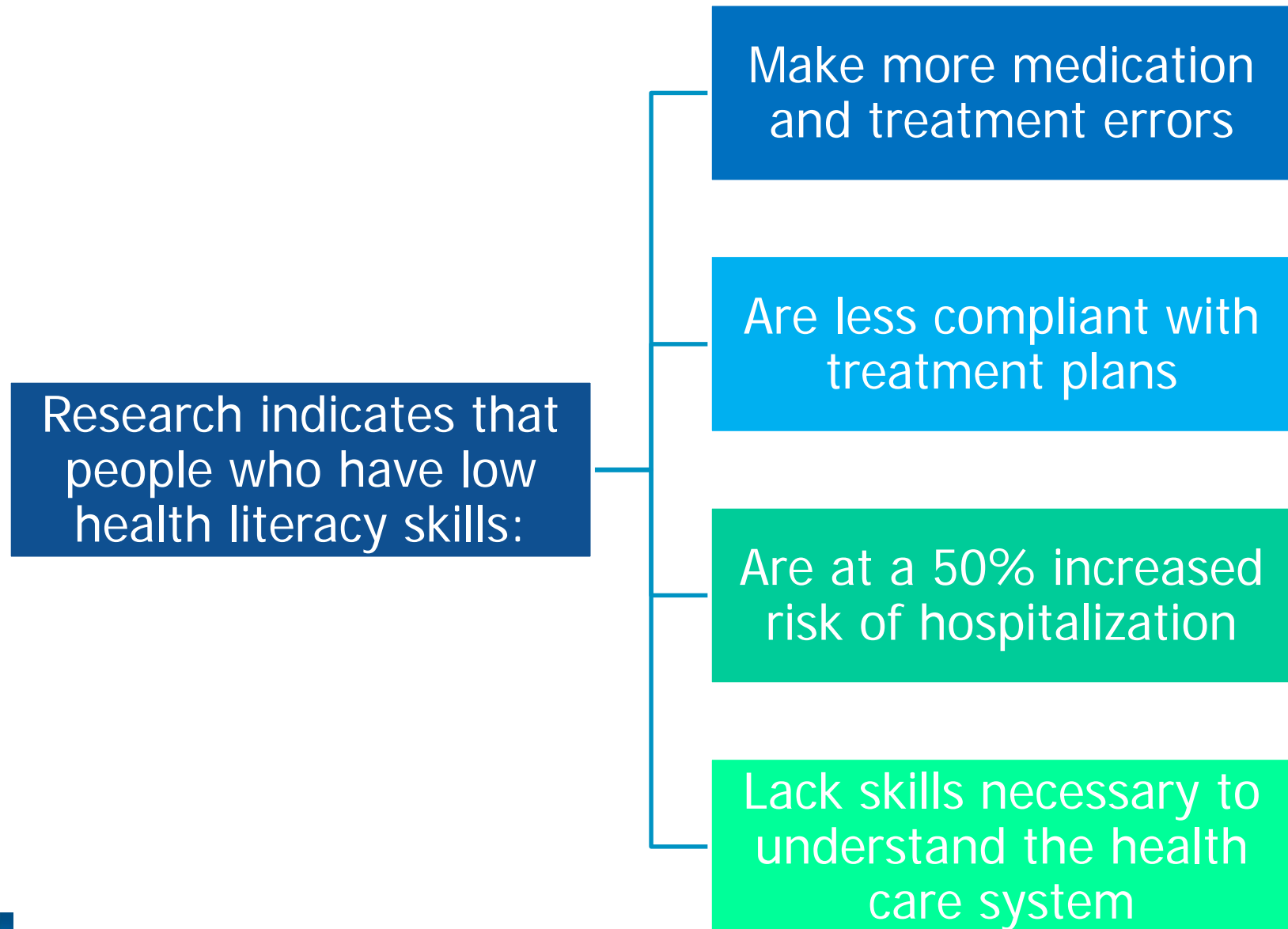
The informed  
consent process and  
related forms



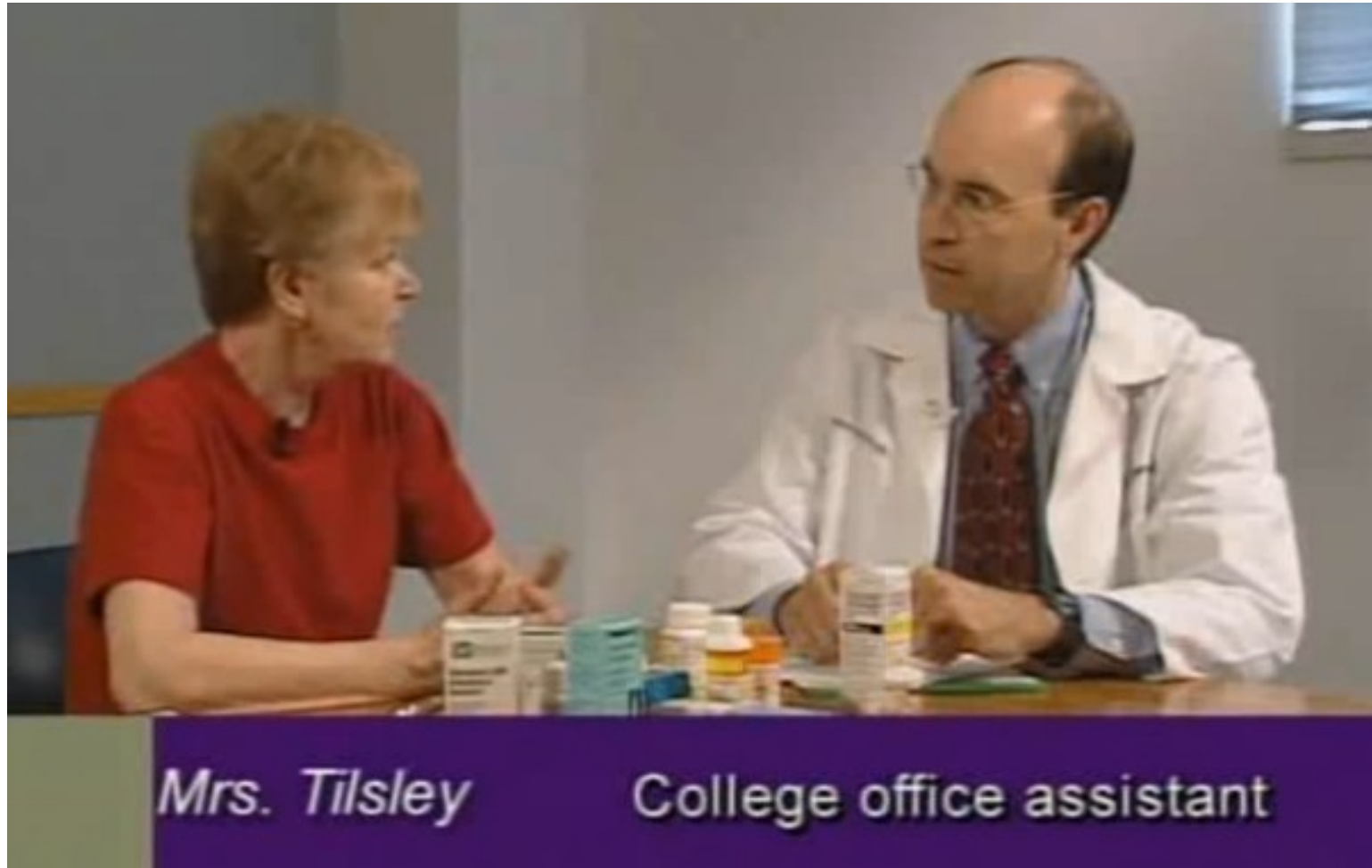
**Source:** ODPHP, *Fact sheet: Health literacy basics*; National Network of Libraries of Medicine. (2013). Health literacy. Retrieved from <http://nnlm.gov/outreach/consumer/hlthlit.html>.

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# The impact of low health literacy (continued)



# AMA Foundation health literacy video





# 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.

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**Source:** Patient Education Update. (2012). Interacting with older patients: 13 tips on better communication. Retrieved from <http://www.patienteducationupdate.com/2012-03-01/article1.asp>

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# Risk strategies for verbal communication

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

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Allow time for questions and restate information as needed.

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

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

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

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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 . . ."



# Risk strategies for written communication

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Ensure patient educational materials are written in plain language (4th–5<sup>th</sup>-grade reading level).

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Limit content to what patients really need to know. Put the most important information first.

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Present information in a logical order, group related information together, focus on one topic per paragraph, and use descriptive headings.

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Use a font size of at least 12 points; avoid overuse of capitalization and italics, which are difficult to read.

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Use words that are well known to individuals without medical training.

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Use examples and visual aids (e.g., illustrations or tables) to make complex material easier to understand.

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Ensure that content is appropriate for the age and culture of the target audience.

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Utilize available plain language resources from the National Institutes of Health, the National Library of Medicine, and professional associations.

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# Health literacy tools — CDC



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
CDC 24/7: Saving Lives, Protecting People™



CDC A-Z INDEX ▾

## Health Literacy



### About This Site

This site provides information and tools to improve health literacy and public health. These resources are for all organizations that interact and communicate with people about health.

[More >](#)

### Learn About Health Literacy

- [What Is Health Literacy?](#)
- [Understanding Health Literacy](#)
- [Understanding Literacy and Numeracy](#)

[More >](#)

### Plan And Act

- [What is the National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy?](#)
- [What is the vision of the Plan?](#)
- [Organizational Attributes](#)
- [How can I use the plan?](#)

[More >](#)

### Develop Materials

- [Guidance and Standards](#)
- [Plain Language](#)
- [Audiences](#)
- [Visual Communication](#)
- [Testing Messages and Materials](#)

[More >](#)

### Find Training

- [Writing for the Public](#)
- [Using Numbers and Explaining Risk](#)
- [Creating Easier to Understand Lists, Charts, and Graphs](#)
- [Speaking with the Public](#)

[More >](#)

### Connect With Health Literacy

Sign up for email updates from Health Literacy and the Health Literacy BLOG.

 [Subscribe to Health Literacy](#) 

 [Subscribe to Bridging the Health Literacy Gap Blog](#) 

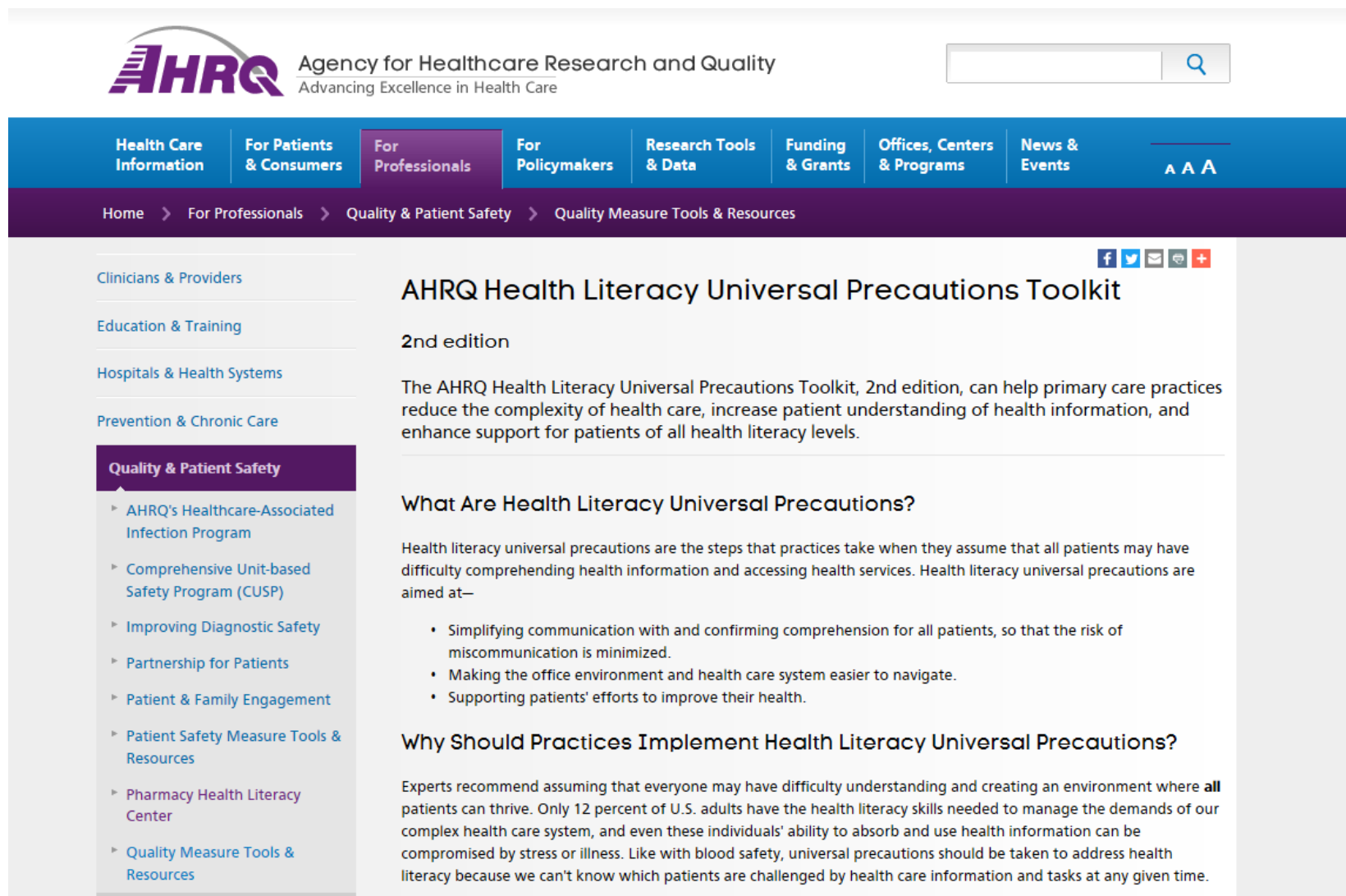
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/index.html>

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# Health literacy tools — AHRQ



The screenshot shows the AHRQ website with the following elements:

- Header:** AHRQ logo, "Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality", "Advancing Excellence in Health Care", and a search bar.
- Navigation Bar:** Links for Health Care Information, For Patients & Consumers, For Professionals (selected), For Policymakers, Research Tools & Data, Funding & Grants, Offices, Centers & Programs, and News & Events.
- Breadcrumbs:** Home > For Professionals > Quality & Patient Safety > Quality Measure Tools & Resources.
- Left Sidebar:** A list of categories including Clinicians & Providers, Education & Training, Hospitals & Health Systems, Prevention & Chronic Care, and Quality & Patient Safety (selected). Under Quality & Patient Safety, there is a list of resources including AHRQ's Healthcare-Associated Infection Program, Comprehensive Unit-based Safety Program (CUSP), Improving Diagnostic Safety, Partnership for Patients, Patient & Family Engagement, Patient Safety Measure Tools & Resources, Pharmacy Health Literacy Center, and Quality Measure Tools & Resources.
- Main Content Area:**
  - Title:** AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit
  - Version:** 2nd edition
  - Description:** 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.
  - Section: 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.
  - Section: 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.

<http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/index.html>



# Health literacy tools — ODPHP

 U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

www.hhs.gov

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
**Health Communication Activities**

**ODPHP Health Communication**  
[Healthy People 2010 Health Communication Focus Area](#)  
**Health Literacy Improvement**  
[Consumer and Patient e-Health](#)  
[Resources](#)

**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 \[PDF - 155 kb\]](#)



# Health literacy tools — plainlanguage.gov

The screenshot displays the plainlanguage.gov website. At the top left is the logo with the text "Plain Language.gov" and "Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public". To the right of the logo is a "Popular Topics" list: Regulations, Health Literacy, Financial, and Before-and-After. Below the logo is a grid of links: "Federal Plain Language Guidelines" (March 2011 - Rev. 1, May 2011), "Plain Language - It's the Law" (Agency Requirements, Agency PL Webpage, PL in Federal Agencies), "Plain-Language Training" (Training Resources), "Tips & Tools" (Starting a Plain-Language Program, Planning a Plain-Language Website), "Examples Database (beta)", and "Examples". A "Search" bar with a "Search" button and "Powered by Google" text is on the right. Below the search bar are sections for "Meetings" (Monthly PLAIN Meeting, Join PLAIN), "News" (OMB Final PL Guidance, Plain Language: It's the law, Executive Order 13563 - PL and regs), and "Events" (Train-the-Trainer Bootcamp). A "Site Highlights" section at the bottom left includes "Designated Senior Officials and Agency Webpages" and "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services videos". A blue footer bar at the bottom contains the text "What is Plain Language? | Why Plain Language? | Where do we use Plain Language?".

**Plain Language.gov**  
Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public

**Popular Topics**  
Regulations  
Health Literacy  
Financial  
Before-and-After

**Search**  
 Search  
Powered by Google

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

**Plain Language - It's the Law**  
Agency Requirements  
Agency PL Webpage  
PL in Federal Agencies

**Plain-Language Training**  
Training Resources

**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

**Meetings**  
Monthly PLAIN Meeting  
(second Wednesday of every month)  
[Join PLAIN](#)

**News**  
[OMB Final PL Guidance](#)  
[Plain Language: It's the law](#)  
[Executive Order 13563 - PL and regs](#)

**Events**  
[Train-the-Trainer Bootcamp](#)  
(September 18, 2014)

**What is Plain Language? | Why Plain Language?**  
[Where do we use Plain Language?](#)



# Health literacy tools — Office of Minority Health

 U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Office of Minority Health

En Español | Newsroom | Contact Us

Search:

About OMH | What We Do | Resource Center | Policy and Data | Cultural Competency | Funding and Programs

Cultural Competency

Center for Linguistic and Cultural Competency in Health Care

National CLAS Standards

Think Cultural Health Website

Continuing Education

 ACCELERATING HEALTH EQUITY FOR THE NATION  
National Minority Health Month 2016

 MY HEALTH

OMH Home > Cultural Competency

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 to 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.

 language

More Resources

Oral Health e-Curriculum

CLAS Blueprint

CLAS Fact Sheet (PDF)

Legislating CLAS

Center for Linguistic and Cultural Competency in Health Care

# Additional health literacy resources

- National Patient Safety Foundation: Ask Me 3<sup>®</sup> — [www.npsf.org/?page=askme3](http://www.npsf.org/?page=askme3)
- National Library of Medicine: Easy-to-Ready Health Materials — [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/all\\_easytoread.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/all_easytoread.html)
- National Quality Forum: Improving Patient Safety Through Informed Consent for Patients With Limited Health Literacy — [www.qualityforum.org/Publications/2005/09/Improving\\_Patient\\_Safety\\_Through\\_Informed\\_Consent\\_for\\_Patients\\_with\\_Limited\\_Health\\_Literacy.aspx](http://www.qualityforum.org/Publications/2005/09/Improving_Patient_Safety_Through_Informed_Consent_for_Patients_with_Limited_Health_Literacy.aspx)
- The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine: Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion — [www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Reports/2004/Health-Literacy-A-Prescription-to-End-Confusion.aspx](http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Reports/2004/Health-Literacy-A-Prescription-to-End-Confusion.aspx)
- MedPro Group: Checklist for Patient Comprehension — [www.medpro.com/documents/10502/2899801/Checklist\\_Patient+Comprehension.pdf](http://www.medpro.com/documents/10502/2899801/Checklist_Patient+Comprehension.pdf)
- University of Michigan: Plain Language Medical Dictionary — [www.lib.umich.edu/taubman-health-sciences-library/plain-language-medical-dictionary](http://www.lib.umich.edu/taubman-health-sciences-library/plain-language-medical-dictionary)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Plain Language Thesaurus for Health Communications — [https://depts.washington.edu/respcare/public/info/Plain\\_Language\\_Thesaurus\\_for\\_Health\\_Communications.pdf](https://depts.washington.edu/respcare/public/info/Plain_Language_Thesaurus_for_Health_Communications.pdf)

