



## Seniors: Health Literacy and Healthy Aging

There are 36 million adults age 65 or older living in the U.S., and this population struggles with understanding and acting on health information more than any other age group.<sup>1</sup> It is critical that we help older adults effectively navigate and utilize the health care system and the information they need to stay healthy.

### Facts

- Older adults have documented health literacy problems. The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy included the first-ever national assessment of health literacy, which found that adults age 65 and older have lower health literacy scores than all other age groups surveyed. Only 3 percent of the older adults who were surveyed were measured as proficient.<sup>2</sup>
- For the growing population of older Americans aged 65 years or older—expected to reach more than 71 million by 2030—difficulties with health literacy can complicate already challenging health problems.<sup>2</sup>
- As many as 80 percent of older Americans have at least one chronic health condition. The more health conditions people have, the more they need to navigate the health care system and interpret complex health information. These tasks are challenging for people with low health literacy. Particular challenges for some older adults are accessing health information on the Internet and using basic math.<sup>2</sup>

### Key Words

Older adults, Chronic health issues, Communicating with medical community, Accessing health information, Geriatric health promotion

### Start today:

Work with sponsors of local health care events (e.g., health fairs, public workshops, or free screenings) to spread the word about improving health literacy for older adults.



## Tips for Health Educators

Understanding that older adults have significant strengths can help you as you assist older adults with issues related to health and health literacy. Research shows us that cognitive impairment is not an inevitable part of aging. In fact, older individuals typically use experience, wisdom, and a positive attitude to successfully navigate life challenges and changes.

### What You Can Do

### Starter Tips

*Acknowledge older adults' strengths.*<sup>3</sup>

- Focus on the interests of older adults and what they can contribute.

*Encourage activity.*<sup>3</sup>

- Think of the brain as a muscle that needs to be exercised to stay in shape.
- Encourage both mental and physical activity, as well as challenging leisure activities.
- Encourage older adults to put their energies toward their own interests and to finding new interests.

*Facilitate strong social networks.*<sup>3</sup>

- Staying in touch with others can keep older adults from feeling isolated.
- Research has shown that having support networks may improve health.

*Encourage older adults and their family caregivers to ask questions.*<sup>3</sup>

- Emphasize the importance of understanding information and directions from health care providers.
- Create a shame-free environment where older adults feel free to ask questions and stay informed.

- Develop health information campaigns with specific knowledge of the cultural characteristics, media habits, and language preferences for older adults.

- + The National Institutes of Health has developed a checklist on how to make websites easier for seniors to use: <http://www.nih.gov/icd/od/ocpl/resources/wag/documents/checklist.pdf>
- + *Making Web Sites More Accessible for Users Who Are Older and/or Have a Disability* includes background information on visual disabilities and offers strategies for improving accessibility. It is available at [http://www.addfamilysupport360.org/3\\_10/DDRDocuments/TAE\\_Issue\\_Brief-%20Developing\\_Websites\\_for\\_Users\\_Who\\_are\\_Older\\_and-or\\_Have\\_a\\_Dis.pdf](http://www.addfamilysupport360.org/3_10/DDRDocuments/TAE_Issue_Brief-%20Developing_Websites_for_Users_Who_are_Older_and-or_Have_a_Dis.pdf)
- + *Making Text Legible: Designing for People with Partial Sight* provides good examples of effective legibility choices for anyone. It is available by the Lighthouse International at <http://www.lighthouse.org/accessibility/design/accessible-print-design/making-text-legible>
- + *Communicating With Your Hard-of-Hearing Patient* is a tip sheet developed by the University of Washington Medical Center to address problems related to hard-of-hearing patient communication: <http://depts.washington.edu/pfes/PDFs/HardOfHearingCultureClue.pdf>



## Resources

- Consult the *Quick Guide to Health Literacy* to learn more about health literacy and strategies professionals can implement to improve health communication with older adults: <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/olderadults/default.htm>
- *A Guide for Older People: Talking with Your Doctor* helps older adults communicate easily and effectively with their physicians about their health: [http://www.nia.nih.gov/NR/rdonlyres/90DF996C-DF5F-4245-B7CA-B2E1B993D8C7/0/TWYD\\_0521\\_web.pdf](http://www.nia.nih.gov/NR/rdonlyres/90DF996C-DF5F-4245-B7CA-B2E1B993D8C7/0/TWYD_0521_web.pdf)
- *Improving Health Literacy for Older Adults: Expert Panel Report 2009* is a report presented by the CDC which discusses the benefits of increased access to consumer health information, and the need to assist older adults in gaining access to and making sense of available health information: <http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/Learn/pdf/olderadults.pdf>
- *University of Minnesota: Online Learning Modules with a Focus on Addressing Culturally Competent Health Care for Older Adults*: <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/ContinuingEd/Default.asp>
- *Case Studies in Geriatric Health Literacy* raises awareness on the geriatric patient population and their risk for low health literacy and interventions that are effective in helping these patients understand how to care for themselves. <http://www.nursingcenter.com/pdf.asp?AID=1201508>

## Strategy in Action

### Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership

<http://www.healthliteracymn.org/resources/help-mn-seniors>

The HeLP MN Seniors Workshop Program materials provide everything you need to conduct your own health literacy program in your community. The evidence-based workshop program was developed through the use of formal evaluation tools, with findings incorporated into the design of the workshop and evaluation materials.

The HeLP MN Seniors workshops were developed to help older adults communicate with their health care providers and find accurate online health information. The workshops are available for use by anyone interested in improving the health of older adults with good information.



## References

1. Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership. (2010). *Health Literacy Program for Minnesota Seniors (HeLP MN Seniors) Evidence-Based Workshop Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.healthliteracymn.org/resources/help-mn-seniors>
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2010). *Quick Guide to Health Literacy and Older Adults*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/olderadults/literacy.htm#p5>
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2010). *Quick Guide to Health Literacy and Older Adults: Strengths of Older Adults*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/olderadults/strengths.htm#p1>