



Healthcare Settings: Practice Changes to Improve Health Literacy

If patients cannot comprehend needed health information, attempts to improve the quality of care and reduce healthcare costs and disparities may fail.

The second goal of the [National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy](#) aims to promote changes in the healthcare system that improve health information, communication, informed decision-making and access to health services. Improving health literacy is part of this desired change to a person-centered system and essential to the delivery of cost-effective, safe and high-quality health services. Historically, lower health literacy has plagued utilization rates, been associated with poorer outcomes and contributed to inequalities in health status and access to care. Health educators have a role to play in creating an environment that addresses limited health literacy among patients and increasing the awareness, skills and practice changes among providers delivering healthcare services.

Facts

- Even though most adults read at an eighth-grade level, and 20 percent of the population reads at or below a fifth-grade level, most health care materials are written at a 10th-grade level.¹
- Nearly 9 out of 10 adults have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely available in our healthcare facilities.²
- Lower health literacy is associated with increased hospitalization, greater emergency care use, lower use of mammography and lower receipt of influenza vaccine.^{3,4}
- People are more likely to skip necessary medical tests, take their medications incorrectly and have a harder time managing chronic diseases like diabetes or high blood pressure.^{3,4}
- Studies have shown that 40-80 percent of the medical information patients receive is forgotten immediately and nearly half of the information retained is incorrect.⁵
- Patients understand medical information better when spoken to slowly, simple words are used, and a restricted amount of information is presented.⁶
- Individuals with low levels of literacy are less equipped to benefit from the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), with potentially costly consequences for both those who pay for and deliver their care, as well as for themselves. Rates of low literacy are disproportionately high among lower-income Americans eligible for publicly financed care through Medicare or Medicaid.⁷

Key Words

Plain language, Teach-back method, Culturally and linguistically appropriate services, Universal precautions

Start today:

Use proven methods of checking patient understanding, such as the teach-back method, to ensure patients understand: *"I want to be sure I explained everything clearly. Would you please explain it back to me so I can be sure I did?"*



Tips for Health Educators

Here are key communication strategies to improve health literacy when talking to patients and/or participants in health education programs:

- *Warm greeting:* Greet patients with a smile and a welcoming attitude.
- *Eye contact:* Make appropriate eye contact throughout the interaction.
- *Plain, non-medical language:* Use common words when speaking to patients. Take note of what words they use to describe their illness and use them in your conversation.
- *Slow down:* Speak clearly and at a moderate pace.
- *Limit content:* Prioritize what needs to be discussed and limit information to 3-5 key points. Focus on the 'need-to-know' and 'need-to-do'.
- *Repeat key points:* Be specific and concrete in your conversation and repeat key points.
- *Graphics:* Draw pictures, use illustrations, or demonstrate with 3-D models.
- *Patient participation:* Encourage patients to ask questions and be involved in the conversation during visits and to be proactive in their health care.
- *Teach-back:* Confirm patients understand what they need to know and do by asking them to teach back directions.
- *Positive closure:* End on a positive note, be hopeful and empowering.

What You Can Do

Starter Tips

Review and update patient education and program materials to make them easier to understand

- Assess reading levels of materials
- Define medical terminology and eliminate jargon
- Add visuals and models to explain complex or abstract health topics

Create patient-friendly environments

- Consider the first impression and tasks that a patient has to perform for a visit to your office, Is your clinic/site patient-centered?
- Brainstorm ways to create a welcoming, calm environment
- Promote an attitude of helpfulness by all staff
- Design a brief patient survey to get feedback

Refer patients and program participants to programs and additional resources

- Contact your local literacy council, library and community college to obtain a list of upcoming classes in adult education and English language
- Collect multilingual materials to create a resource box for non-English speakers

Participate in on-going training and professional development

- Sign-up for an online class, webinar or workshop in health literacy, plain language and culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS): <http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/GetTraining.html>
- Join a discussion list: <http://lincs.ed.gov/pipermail/healthliteracy/2011/date.html>

Create a health literacy plan in your organization

- Review the *Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit*: <http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/literacy/>
- Create a team to commit to action steps

Advocate for health literacy as part of health care reform

- Review and share the *Health Literacy Implications of the Affordable Care Act* – a document that discusses health literacy related to coverage expansion, equity, workforce, and healthcare information: http://www.chcs.org/publications3960/publications_show.htm?doc_id=1261193





Resources

- *ACPF Healthy Literacy Video* – Watch and share a 6 ½ minute video by the American College of Physicians Foundation (ACPF) that gives a powerful illustration of the problem of low health literacy, combining interviews with actual patients, commentary from practicing physicians, and health communication statistics: <http://acpfoundation.org/hl/hlvideo.htm>
- *Ask Me 3* – Offered by the National Patient Safety Foundation, a patient education program that can be implemented to promote communication between healthcare providers and patients in order to improve health outcomes. The program encourages patients to understand the answers to three questions:
 - What is my main problem?
 - What do I need to do?
 - Why is it important for me to do this?<http://www.npsf.org/askme3/>
- *Literacy Assessment Tools* – A list of several assessments most commonly applied by researchers and clinical personnel in gauging patient-participant health literacy levels: <http://nchealthliteracy.org/instruments.html>
- *How to Write Easy to Read Health Materials* – Because medical concepts and language are very complex, MedlinePlus offers a guideline to write easy to read health materials: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/etr.html>
- *Questions Are the Answers* – The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality helps prepare patients and providers for visits and offers a structure for their communication: <http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/>
- *Universal Symbols in Healthcare Workbook* – Symbols to add to office/clinic signage to improve understanding and directions: http://www.hablamosjuntos.org/resources/pdf/Best_PracticesFinal-Dec15.pdf
- *“What Did the Doctor Say?”: Improving Health Literacy to Protect Patient Safety* – The Joint Commission report was developed by an expert panel and contains specific recommendations for improving provider-patient communication in order to reduce the burden of low health literacy, and emphasizes the need for organizations to establish communication as a patient safety priority and calls for financial support for patient-centered initiatives: http://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/18/improving_health_literacy.pdf



Strategy in Action

Meeting the Needs of Patients With Limited Literacy Skills

The New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC) serves 1.3 million residents, 25 percent of whom have LEP. To meet the needs of those with limited health literacy, HHC has a central repository of (1) multilingual materials that are reviewed for literacy level by multilingual staff who are trained in the principles of plain language; (2) patient-centered resources based on consumer studies; and (3) gateway resources, such as interpreters and client navigators. *Featured in National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy.* For more on this strategy, visit the townhall summary at <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/TownHall/ny.htm>

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