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*From healthliteracymonth.org¹



Key Inforbits

- What is Health Literacy?
- Risk Factors for Low Health Literacy
- Red Flags for Low Health Literacy
- Assessing Health Literacy in Patients
- Ways You Can Help Patients Improve Their Health Literacy

What is Health Literacy?

And why it matters

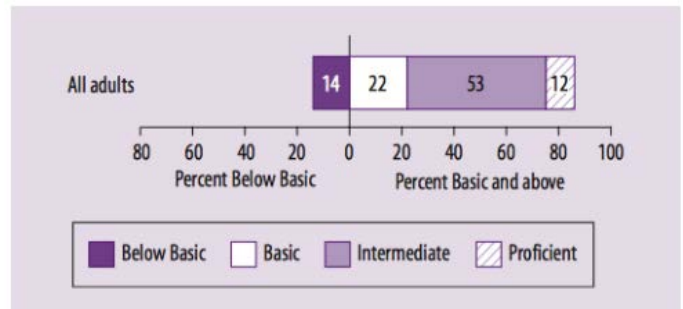
Health literacy can be defined as the ability of an individual to obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions. Health literacy skills can be used both to make sense of health information and to provide health information to others. It's possible even for someone who reads and writes well to face issues with health literacy. Any time an organization or healthcare provider gives a patient health information they don't understand, this creates a health literacy problem. Health literacy affects a patient's ability to fill out medical forms, locate the appropriate provider or service, engage in self-care or disease management, or share pertinent health history. Per the National Assessment of Health Literacy, only about 12% of adults have proficient health literacy while 14% are estimated to have Below Basic health literacy (see "Risk Factors" below). All this adds up to mean your patient is more likely to not understand information about their health than fully comprehend. This is why it's critical that we as healthcare providers strive to assess health literacy, check for understanding, and use plain language.^{3,4}

An infographic with a dark blue background. At the top, it says "patients with low HEALTH LITERACY...". Below this are four white boxes, each with an icon and text: 1. An ambulance icon with the text "Are more likely to visit an EMERGENCY ROOM". 2. A hospital bed icon with the text "Have more HOSPITAL STAYS". 3. A clipboard icon with the text "Are less likely to follow TREATMENT PLANS". 4. A skull and crossbones icon with the text "Have higher MORTALITY RATES". At the bottom, it says "www.cdc.gov/phpr" and includes the CDC logo.

*From CDC.gov²

Risk Factors for Low Health Literacy

Nearly 36% of adults in the U.S. have low health literacy (a kindergarten to 6th grade reading level). About 53% of adults have intermediate health literacy (a 7th to 8th grade reading level). An average reading level of U.S. adults is at an 8th grade level or below, but more than 75% of patient education materials are written at a high school or college reading level. Most importantly, health literacy may NOT always relate to years of education or reading ability.^{5,7,8}



*From nces.ed.gov⁵

Populations at risk for limited health literacy⁶:

- Elderly
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Lack of education opportunity (people with a high school degree or lower)
- Low income
- Non-native speakers of English
- Recent immigrants

Red Flags for Low Health Literacy

It is important to know that anyone can have low health literacy. It is important to take into consideration risk factors, while also recognizing possible red flags. A patient may not feel comfortable when being asked about medications. This may be due to a variety of reasons such as they don't know the answer, they can't read the information, or they don't understand the question. It can be difficult for a patient to say, "I don't understand." or "I can't read that." while being asked about health information. Therefore, it is extremely important for healthcare professionals to recognize these red flags and act accordingly.



*From commons/wikimedia.org

Examples of responses given to written information by patients that could signify low health literacy

- "I don't have time to read that now. I will read it at home."
- "I forgot my glasses at home. I'll read it later."

Other examples:⁹

- Unable to name medications
- Identifies medication by looking at pill color or size
- Remember medications by time of day they take it
- Incomplete registration forms
- Frequently missed appointments
- Asks fewer questions



*From pennmedicine.org¹⁰

Assessing Health Literacy in Patients

There are multiple screening tools that can be used in order to help assess the health literacy of a patient. A few examples that the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) developed are the Short Assessment of Health Literacy- Spanish and English (SAHL- S&E) and the Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine- Short Form (REALM-SF). Since English and Spanish are the two most common languages spoken in the United States, it was important to develop a screening tool in each language. These methods are designed to measure an individual's reading comprehension in a medical context.¹¹

For example, in the SAHL-E the healthcare provider presents the patient with 18 test words. Each of these test words then has a related word and an unrelated word presented with it. The patient is to identify the word that is closest in meaning. Advantages of this tool are it takes about 2-3 minutes and it is easy to administer.¹¹

Another method that can be used is the REALM-SF screening tool. This screening presents a list of 7 words and tests to see if patients can recognize each word. It is a very quick exam and is easy to administer. The healthcare provider shows and reads a healthcare related word out loud and asks the patient if they recognize it. The patient can pass on if they do not know. The individual gets one point for each word they recognize and 0 for a pass or not recognized. After going through each of the words, the total number is added up and correlates to a grade equivalent.¹¹

0 = Third grade and below, will not be able to read most low-literacy materials

- Needs oral instructions

1-3= Fourth to sixth grade, may not be able to read prescription labels

- Needs low-literacy materials

4-6= Seventh to eighth grade

- May need low-literacy materials

7= High school able to read most patient materials

Ways You Can Help Patients Improve Their Health Literacy

Written communication strategies^{6,12}

- Use a 5th grade reading level
- Use a large bold font, bulleted lists, short sentences
- Avoid long words and medical terms (avoid jargons)
- Include basic diagrams and pictures
- Include a lot of white space
- Emphasize key points using highlighting or underlining
- Write with the active voice (say “Use your inhaler” instead of “once an inhaler is used...”)

Verbal communication strategies^{6,12}

- Slow down
- Use the active voice
- Recognize and avoid jargon, technical terms, abbreviations
- Use short sentences and paragraphs (15 words or less)
- Provide some examples
- Use visual-aids
- Use the “teach-back” technique
- Present the most important information first and last
- Be respectful and caring

List of Plain Language Alternatives^{6,14}

Medical term	Plain Language
Immune system	Body’s ability to fight germs and sickness
Infection	Problem caused by germs
Anti-inflammatory	Lessens swelling and irritation
Hypertension	High blood pressure
Lipids	Fats in the blood
Supplement	Add to, in addition to
Adverse event	Possible side effect or reaction after getting a shot or taking medicine

Bottom line: Always be Simple & Clear.

Resources for Patients

- **Adult Education and Literacy**¹³
 - The adult education program known as the US Adult Basic Education and Literacy (ABEL) system
 - The Alabama Community College System (ACCS) offers various programs that helps adults get the basic skills they need such as reading, writing, and math. It also offers English literacy classes for non-English speaking people.¹³
 - Website: <https://www.accs.cc/index.cfm/adult-education/adult-education-services/>
 - Phone: 334-293-4500

Resources for Medical Professionals

- **Everyday Words for Public Health Communication – CDC**¹⁴
 - It is a hand-out booklet including a list of frequently used terms in public health materials and their alternatives in plain language.
 - Website: <https://www.cdc.gov/other/pdf/everydaywordsforpublichealthcommunication.pdf>
- **CDC's health literacy website**³
 - Provides numerous information, tools, and resources related to health literacy
 - Website: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/index.html>.
- **National Institutes of Health**¹⁵
 - Provides an information about clear communication skills and numerous tools and resources.
 - Website: <https://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communications-public-liaison/clear-communication/health-literacy>.

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The last “dose” ...

“If you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it yourself.”

~ Albert Einstein [Theoretical Physicist, 1879 - 1955]

Health Professional with a Question? Drugs – Therapeutics – Pharmacy Practice?

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