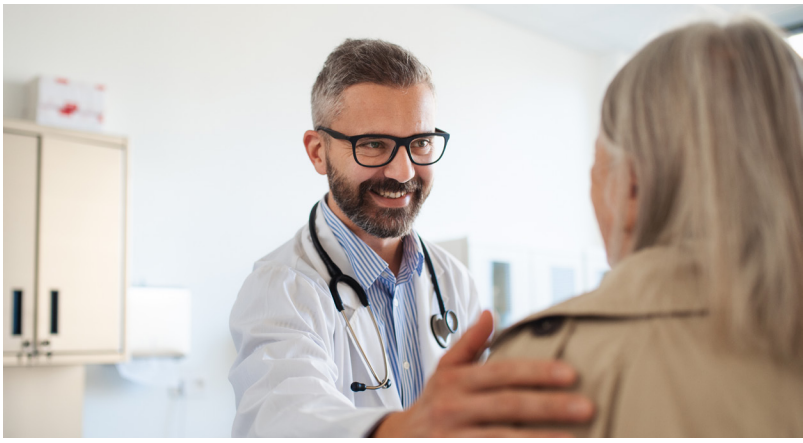
Provider Partner Newsletter | Health Literacy Series

Why health literacy matters: a foundation for better outcomes



Health literacy affects every patient

Health literacy depends on both a person's ability to understand and use health information and how clearly that information is communicated. Illness, stress, and a complex healthcare system can make health information harder to process. Clear communication can help patients understand their health information and know what to do next. By using plain language, focusing on the most important information, and confirming understanding, you can help patients make informed decisions, take an active role in their care, and follow through with their care plan.

Evidence snapshot

- During medical visits, patients may forget 40% to 80% of the information discussed. Of the information they remember, nearly half may be incorrect.[1]
- Illness, stress, unfamiliar terminology, and complex healthcare processes can make it difficult for any patient to process, retain, and act on health information.
- People who have difficulty understanding and using health information are more likely to experience:
  - Poorer self-management and disease control for chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart failure, COPD, and asthma.
  - Medication errors or missed doses caused by unclear instructions.
  - Lower rates of preventive screenings and vaccinations.
  - Higher rates of emergency department use and 30-day hospital readmissions.
  - A higher risk of death, especially among older adults managing several chronic conditions.



The Universal Precautions Principle

- Use clear communication with every patient. Do not try to identify who may have limited health literacy. Anyone can have difficulty understanding or using health information, especially when they are ill, under stress, or navigating a complex healthcare system.[2]

When clear communication matters most

Aging patients (65+)

Older adults may manage several chronic conditions, medications, or care plans. This can make health information harder to follow. Focus on the most important messages, allow time for questions, and use teach-back to confirm understanding.

Complex or chronic conditions

Managing a chronic condition may involve medications, monitoring, lifestyle changes, and visits with different healthcare professionals. Before the patient leaves, explain the next steps in plain language, provide clear written instructions, and use teach-back to confirm understanding.

Communication across languages

Patients who prefer a language other than English may face communication errors and adverse events when their language needs are not met. Use a qualified medical interpreter. Then use teach-back to confirm that the patient understands.[3]

Social and economic barriers

Costs, transportation, caregiving responsibilities, and other priorities can make it harder for patients to get care or follow a treatment plan. Ask about possible barriers, listen without judgment, and connect patients with available support and resources.



1 Source: Kessels RPC. Patients' Memory for Medical Information. Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine. 2003;96(5):219–222.

2 AHRQ, Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit, 3rd Ed.

3 Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). Improving Patient Safety Systems for Patients with Limited English Proficiency: A Guide for Hospitals. Rockville, MD: AHRQ; 2012.

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