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What is Health Literacy?


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What is health literacy?

Health literacy is the ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information to make appropriate health decisions.* Health literacy skills enable individuals to effectively communicate with providers, become engaged in their own health care and follow treatment plans.

* *A Prescription to End Confusion, Lynn Nielsen-Bohlman, Allison M. Panzer, David A. Kindig; The National Academic Press; Washington, D.C.; 2004.*

What Is Health Literacy?

Why is it important?

Healthy literacy directly impacts health outcomes, as well as health care spending. For instance, people with low health literacy don't understand how to properly care for themselves, and are therefore more likely to have additional health problems and more emergency room visits. They may have difficulties using inhalers, reading thermometers, breast feeding properly, scheduling necessary health screenings and maintaining medication adherence. Consequently, low health literacy is estimated to cost the United States health care system between \$50 billion to \$73 billion per year.*

**Health Literacy and Patient Safety: Help Patients Understand*, Barry D. Weiss; American Medical Association Foundation, 2007.

Who has low health literacy?

Low health literacy is a bigger problem than expected. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), 36 percent of adults have a basic or below basic level of health literacy. Basic or below basic signifies increased difficulties interacting with health care providers, following clinical direction, engaging in preventive care through self-management or illness prevention, and navigating the health care system to find the proper support. Other studies revealed 26 percent of people did not understand when their next appointment was scheduled, 42 percent did not understand how to take medication on an empty stomach and up 78 percent misinterpret warnings on prescription labels.*

*Weiss, 2007.

While anyone can have low health literacy, there are risk factors, including:

- Advanced age.
- Did not finish high school.
- Low income.
- Limited English or English as a second language.
- Unemployment.

Identifying and addressing low health literacy

Some people with low health literacy may be unaware of the problem. For others, it may be a source of embarrassment. Either way, it's unlikely patients with low health literacy will voluntarily disclose the limitation to their health care providers.

Certain behaviors and responses, however, signal there could be a problem. Health professionals are urged to be aware of patients who:

- Say they cannot read something because they "forgot their glasses."
- Have difficulty filling out forms or following up with medications, tests or appointments.
- Are unable to name their medications, the reason(s) they were prescribed or how they should be taken.
- Say they are "somewhat," "a little bit" or "not at all" confident filling out medical forms by themselves.

If providers observe these or other warning signs that lead them to suspect low health literacy is an issue, the providers should take the following actions to help engage the patients in their own care and improve health outcomes:

- **Avoid medical terminology.** Use easy-to-understand laymen's terms and phrases when discussing health conditions and treatment options, such as the examples in the table below.

Medical Term	Plain Language
Contraception	Birth control
Hypertension	High blood pressure
Referral	Send you to another doctor
Radiology department	X-ray department

- **Don't overload the patient with information.** Instead of going into great detail, which can be overwhelming and confusing, focus on the most important big-picture issues, reiterating key points and phrases to improve comprehension and retention.
- **Employ the teach-back method.** Respectfully explain to patients that you want to make sure they have all the information they need and understand your instructions. Follow this by asking questions such as, "Can you explain to me how you will take your medicine?" or "What will you tell your husband/wife about your condition when you get home?" The most important thing is getting patients to repeat the key medical information by engaging in a dialogue that is comfortable for you and the patients. Repeat and clarify as necessary.
- **Incorporate more visual aids.** Pictures, diagrams and/or models are effective for showing patients what you are trying to explain.
- **Utilize AmeriHealth Caritas Louisiana as a resource.** If you have patients struggling with health literacy, you can refer them to AmeriHealth Caritas' Case Management or Care Coordination Services at **888-643-0005**. Case managers can help provide members with more information about their medical conditions, offer medication reminders, and follow up regarding their appointments or tests. In addition, case managers can help them connect to other beneficial community resources and translation services.

References:

Neilsen-Bohlman, Lyn; Panzer, Allison M. Kindig, David A.; *A Prescription to End Confusion*; The National Academic Press; Washington, D.C.; 2004

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White, Sheida Ph.D.; "Assessing the Nation's Health Literacy: Key Concepts and Findings of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)" American Medical Association Foundation; <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/quickguide.pdf>; 2008. Accessed June 6, 2013.

