

October is Health Literacy Month

It's estimated that more than 90 million Americans have low health literacy, which means they may not be able to understand health information, make informed choices about their care, navigate our complex health care system or communicate effectively with their health care team or families. This can lead to confusion, compromised patient safety and costly medical mistakes.

Low health literacy can affect anyone, even those with a college degree or a career in health care.

The Joint Commission calls upon health care providers to provide effective communication for patients and families and to integrate health literacy concepts into their day-to-day practice. However, not all providers have the needed health literacy skills or training to do so. Listed below are several strategies for promoting health literacy and resources which can be helpful to all health care professionals, regardless of their familiarity with the subject.

Strategies to improve health literacy focus on improving written and spoken communication, self-management and empowerment and supportive systems. Here are some things you can do:

Spoken Communication

- Give the most important information first
- Use plain non-medical language instead of medical terms
- Limit and repeat content
- Slow down
- Always use the Teach-Back Method - confirm that patients understand what they need to know and do by asking them to explain back important information in their own words.

Written Communication

Content

- Focus on need to know or need to do information.

- Use active voice and plain language – write information that is easy to understand.
- Keep sentences short and words to 2 syllables or less when possible.
- Test your document's reading level although be aware that reading level alone is not a guarantee that a document will be easy to read. Learn more about writing and designing easy-to-read materials for patients or work with someone who is trained in this area.
- Ask patients to evaluate your forms and other written materials. User feedback is key.
- Be careful when using numbers – many people struggle with limited numerical literacy as well

Formatting

- Use font sizes between 12 and 14 points. For headings, use a font size at least 2 points higher than the main text.
- Leave lots of white space on the page – at least ½ inch to 1 inch for margins and between columns.
- Use headings and sub-headings to help break up the text and group key messages together.
- Break up text with bullet points but be careful not to use too many
- Use visuals - make sure they are easy-to-understand and culturally relevant and sensitive.

Self-management and empowerment

- Encourage questions – patients may not feel comfortable asking questions or they may feel you're too busy. Asking patients what questions they have **and** saying you have the time to answer them can be very helpful.
- Use open ended questions such as: "What other questions do you have?" or "This information may be very new to you and I expect you have some questions. What would you like to know more about?"
- Use body language to invite questions – sit, don't stand.

- Look at patients when talking and listening – try not to interrupt.

Supportive systems

- Assess each patient's needs and support system.
- Link patients to other support systems when needed, such as social work and financial counselors.

Source: *AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit*, 2nd edition

Health Literacy Resources

[Always use Teach-back toolkit](#) – provides resources and training tools for clinicians about the Teach-back method.

[Health Literacy Out Loud](#) – sign up for health literacy updates or listen to podcasts from experts in the field. Hosted by Helen Osborne, a leader in the Health Literacy Movement

[Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit 2nd Edition](#) – offered by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). The toolkit offers strategies to improve written and spoken communication, self-management, empowerment and support systems.

[Health literacy video](#) – a 6 ½ minute video from the American College of Physicians that illustrates common health literacy challenges patients face.

[Health Literacy website](#) – from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Institute for Health Care Advancement – sign up for their Health literacy listserv by clicking [here](#). This organization also hosts a yearly [health literacy conference](#) each May.

[Plain Language: Getting Started or Brushing Up](#) – a step by step resource from the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

[Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective](#) – a detailed guide from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).