

Health Literacy & Plain Language Overview

FACT SHEET

What is health literacy?

- Health literacy is the ability to read, understand, and act on health information.
- Health literacy allows people to understand instructions on prescription drug bottles and doctors' forms as well as talk about health needs and concerns with a doctor or nurse.

Why is health literacy important?

- Patients need to have the skills to understand their conditions and talk with a doctor or nurse so that they can be active in their own health and health care decisions.
- Nearly nine out of ten adults may lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease. ¹
- Almost four out of every ten people in the US can only perform simple literary tasks such as finding a program in a TV guide. ²
- One out of five American adults reads at the 5th grade level or below, yet most health care materials are written above the 10th grade level. ³

U.S. Report Card on Health Literacy

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- Almost 36% of the U.S. population can only perform simple literary tasks such as finding a program in a TV guide.
- One out of five American adults reads at the 5th grade level or below, yet most healthcare materials are written above the 10th grade level.

What are the consequences of poor health literacy?

- Patients with limited health literacy skills are less likely to: ⁴
 - understand information from doctors or nurses.
 - act on medication directions and appointment schedules.
 - navigate the health system to obtain the services they need.
- Patients with limited health literacy skills are more likely to:
 - have ongoing, chronic illnesses.
 - visit the hospital and go to the emergency room.
 - have higher health care costs than people with better health literacy skills

How can plain language improve health literacy?

Plain language — or everyday living room language — makes written and spoken information easier to understand, without “dumbing down” or “talking down” to the reader.

- Key elements of plain language include: ⁵

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- organizing information so that the most important points come first.
 - breaking complex information into small, easy to understand chunks.
 - using simple language and defining technical terms.

What can you do?

- Consider the readability of your document. The Fry Readability Formula can help you determine the approximate grade reading level of a written passage. For more information, visit www.readabilityformulas.com.
- Make your documents visually easy to follow. Use short paragraphs, bulleted sections, and white space.
- Make your documents culturally sensitive. Include pictures, graphics, and language that support messages.
- For more information and resources on health literacy and plain language, visit the Health Literacy Institute website here: www.healthliteracyinstitute.com.

¹ "Health Literacy Basics." Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. US Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsbasic.htm>

² "The Health Literacy of America's Adults." National Center for Education Statistics. US Department of Education. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006483.pdf>

³ Health Literacy: Statistics-at-a-Glance." National Patient Safety Foundation. 2008. http://www.npsf.org/askme3/pdfs/STATS_GLANCE_EN.pdf

⁴ "Health Literacy Basics." Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. US Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsbasic.htm>

⁵ "Plain Language: A Promising Strategy for Clearly Communicating Health Information and Improving Health Literacy." Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. US Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/plainlanguage/PlainLanguage.htm>