

Prevention Brief



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VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
Office of Patient Care Services, Veterans Health Administration
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Health Literacy

Bottom Line

- More than 50% of US adults do not have the literacy skills needed to comprehend and use most written materials.
- Ensure that written materials are simple, clear, and easy to comprehend.
- Use easy to read written materials to supplement conversations with patients.

IOM Report on Health Literacy



Quick Health Literacy Assessment

Try using one of the following questions with patients to ascertain level of health literacy:

1. How often do you have someone help you read health materials?
2. How confident are you filling out medical forms by yourself?
3. How often do you have problems learning about your medical condition because of difficulty understanding written information?

Patients are called upon to interface with an increasingly complex health care system. We assume most people learn to read and write in school and with these skills are able to acquire new information. However, a national survey of 1,600 US adults found a significant number of Americans have low-level literacy skills that hamper their participation in the economy and society. This survey also found that the average literacy skills of US adults can be categorized as *somewhat limited*.

Effective communication between

clinicians and patients is hindered in situations where low health literacy is present. Within the health care system, patients must be able to understand and be actively involved to participate in health promotion activities and self-manage chronic conditions. Further, difficulties in communication can cause medical errors, delay in care, treatment mishaps, and other costly, unwanted consequences that are sometimes even deadly. Patient participation in health



care is increasingly recognized as a critical element towards achieving better health care outcomes. This issue of Prevention Brief will provide an overview of health literacy and provide some strategies for working with patients that have low health literacy.

Health Literacy Priorities

Healthy People 2010 defines health literacy as: "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health care decisions." The Institute of Medicine states health literacy takes into account more than the reading level of written materials but includes all aspects of the health care environment and the characteristics of the patient population served: culture, income, age, gender, service history, education, etc. It also encompasses the patient's expectations, preferences, values, cultural beliefs, and experiences. Literacy affects all aspects of care because it influences the exchange and processing of both the written and spoken word.

Thus, health literacy is the fabric that interweaves the process of health care into a dynamic pattern of communication. Because almost 50% of the population has difficulty using the written word in everyday living, the Joint Commission has issued a white paper indicating concern over health literacy and its impact on the delivery of safe, effective care. Their recommendations include:

- 1) *Make effective communication a top priority.* Strategies include knowing the population's demographics and culture, increasing awareness of the health literacy problem with all staff, and identifying areas that need most improvement.
- 2) *Address communication across the continuum of care.*

Make communications simple and clear through the use of everyday language. Identify "hand-off" points when patients are transferred from one care setting or provider to the next and ensure that patients do not become confused or unduly burdened by transitions. Lastly, anticipate areas where communication breakdowns may arise, e.g., complex medical regimens, stressful medical situations, or new conditions or treatments that might result in "information overload".

- 3) *Change policy to promote improved provider-patient communication.* Assure that patient education materials are simple, clear, and easy to comprehend and that providers who deliver patient-centered, culturally-appropriate care are rewarded.

Using Written Materials

Tips for effective communication

Verbal communication

- Ask open ended questions to ascertain patients' comprehension.
- Use everyday language to explain terms.
- Build on what the patient knows.
- Be alert for non-verbal behavior which indicates misunderstanding.
- Provide opportunities for patients to report on what they have understood.
- Provide names and numbers for staff that can be called for questions.

Written communication

- Convey messages clearly.
- Use simple language.
- Organize to support key points and content.
- Use appropriate, effective graphics.
- Underline key points.
- Test materials with the target audience.



One way providers can enhance comprehension of written information is to utilize health education materials that are written at an appropriate reading level. Most health education materials should be written at the 6th grade reading level. Using materials that incorporate the appropriate reading level **and** a clear graphical layout can make a big difference in promoting patients' comprehension since appropriate graphics and pictures can reinforce the written text.

Many options are available for evaluating the reading level of written materials. Most focus on sentence length, complexity of words used, numbers of words in a phrase, and number of syllables in the words, etc. Microsoft Word® has a built in Flesch-Kincaid test to assess a document's reading level. Other tools to assess reading level include the SMOG, Fog and Fry

(see resources for more information).

Clinicians can also decrease the demands on patient literacy through effective patient-clinician communication. Most patients want and need to have effective relationships with their health care team. Providing patients with pamphlets, directing patients to a website, or having patients watch a video can supplement but never replace face-to-face interactions. To increase success with engaging patients in a conversation about health-related matters, **go for the relationship!** Effective relationships are critical to helping patients take a more active role in their health care. Extend the invitation for patients to participate in different ways at different times. The goal is to keep the dialogue flowing. Written

materials are best used to support, complement, augment, and remind patients of what is important for preserving or improving their health.

In 2009, the Office of Veterans Health Education and Information will provide VHA staff with a variety of tools to support literacy in the health care setting through a contract with the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy at Harvard University. These tools include staff education materials, templates, tip sheets, and PowerPoint® slides, which can be used to increase communication between staff and their patients and caregivers. Stay tuned for announcements as to when and where these materials will be available.

Additional Resources

Patient Resources

My HealtheVet:
www.myhealth.va.gov/

Health Information for patients:
<http://medlineplus.gov/>

Ask Me Three:
<http://www.npsf.org/askme3/>

Be An Active Health Care Consumer:
<http://ahrq.gov/path/beactive.htm>

Provider Resources

VA Library Network's Consumer Health Library Panel's resources. This site has a listing of books, resources, toolkits, readability formulas (e.g., SMOG, Fog, Fry) and other helpful items to promote health communication:
<http://www1.va.gov/VALNET/>

Agency for Health Care and Quality Research and Quality: Literacy and Health Outcomes Summary
<http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcsu/mls/sum.htm>

U. S. Department of Health and Human Services: How Health Care Professionals Can Help
<http://www.hrsa.gov/healthliteracy/>

The Plain Language Initiative contains tips on improving communication between the government and the public:
<http://execsec.od.nih.gov/plainlang/guidelines/index.html>

Simply Put (CDC) - tips for writing in simple language, how to use visuals and ways to organize materials for better recall of information.
<http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/simpput.pdf>

The Harvard School of Public Health Literacy Program:
<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/>

Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills by Doak, Doak and Root, available at:
<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/doak.html>