

Understanding health literacy: Bringing the science into the art of effective patient-physician communication
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Learning Objectives:

1. Define health literacy
2. List at least two health related adverse impacts of limited health literacy
3. Describe how to recognize patient who may have limited literacy skills
4. Describe at least two strategies to combat low literacy in the health care environment
5. Bring back to home institution at least one technique to bring health literacy into medical training

1. Definitions:

- Health Literacy – “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”
 - *Healthy People 2010*
 - Context specific; people with adequate general literacy can still have low health literacy
 - Prevalence of low or marginal health literacy approximately 45% across medical studies
 - *NAAL 2003*
 - 36% of adults have basic to below basic levels of health literacy

2. Relevance of health literacy to patient care:

- Low health literate patients get their health information from radio or television. Most health care information is in written form.
- Patients with low or marginal health literacy struggle to understand medical terminology, self-care instructions, informed consent documents, etc.
- Low literacy is associated with poorer health outcomes and behaviors (e.g. increased mortality in the elderly, worse diabetes control, HIV control, asthma knowledge, hypertension knowledge)

3. Recognizing limited literacy skills:

- Be mindful that many low literate patients feel ashamed.
- Clinical red flags for recognizing when patients may have limited literacy
 - Seek help only when illness is advanced
 - Have difficulty explaining medical concerns
 - May pretend they can read (Excuses: “I forgot my glasses.”)
 - Lots of papers folded up in purse/pocket
 - Lack of follow-through with tests/appointments.
 - Questions are basic in nature
 - Have difficulty describing how to take meds
- Asking about literacy
 - Can incorporate into social history
 - Lead in with “What kind of work do/did you do? Where did you go to school? How far did you go in school? How happy are you with the way you read? How confident are you filling out medical forms by yourself?”
 - Ask patient to name and explain purpose of their medications

4. Strategies recommended to improve communication:

- Explain things clearly in plain language
 - Avoid medical jargon and vague terms
- Slow down. Communication can improve by speaking more slowly
- Focus on key messages and repeat
 - Stick to 1-3 key points each visit, focus on patient concerns, repeat key information
- Use a “teach back” or “show me” technique to check understanding
 - Ask patient to repeat back important information or demonstrate new skills
 - “What will you tell your _____ about our discussion when you get home?”
- Create a shame-free environment
 - Ask, “What questions do you have?” instead of “Do you have any questions?”
 - Or “I ask all my patients to bring in their medications”
- Use patient-friendly educational materials to enhance interaction
 - Simple wording, short sentences, 4th-6th grade reading level, picture-based
 - Focused on what patients want to know

5. Patient care and teaching strategies: To be discussed/practiced in small group sessions

Resources:

Organizations and initiatives that support health literacy, plain language, or clear communication

- Academy for Educational Development <http://www.aed.org/> (then search health literacy)
- American Academy on Communication in Healthcare <http://www.aachonline.org/>
- American Association of Retired People (AARP) <http://www.aarp.org/research/health/healthliteracy/>
- American College of Physicians Foundation http://foundation.acponline.org/health_lit.htm
- American Medical Association Foundation <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/8115.html>
- Bayer Institute for Health Care Communication <http://www.healthcarecomm.org/>
- California Health Literacy Initiative <http://www.cahealthliteracy.org/>
- Cancer, Culture, and Literacy Institute <http://www.moffitt.org> (then search health literacy)
- Center for Health Care Strategies <http://www.chcs.org/> (then search health literacy)
- Center for Plain Language <http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org>
- Centre for Literacy of Quebec <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/>
- Coalition for Health Communication <http://www.healthcommunication.net/>
- Consumer Health Vocabulary Initiative <http://www.consumerhealthvocab.org>
- Exchange: Websites & Gateways <http://www.healthcomms.org/resource/website.html>
- Georgia State University <http://education.gsu.edu/csai/site/activities1.htm>
- Hablamos Juntos <http://www.hablamosjuntos.org/>
- Harvard Health Literacy Studies <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/>
- Healthcare and Aging Network (HAN) <http://www.asaging.org/networks/han/healthlit.cfm>
- Health Literacy Curricula (compilation) <http://www.advancinghealthliteracy.com/curricula.html>
- Health Literacy Institute <http://www.healthliteracyinstitute.net/>
- Health Literacy Month <http://www.healthliteracymonth.com/>
- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) <http://www.hrsa.gov/healthliteracy/>
- Institute for Healthcare Advancement <http://www.ih4health.org/>
- Institute of Medicine (focus on communication) <http://www.iom.edu/focuson.asp?id=6095>
- LaRue Medical Literacy Exercises <http://www.mcedservices.com/medex/medex.htm>
- Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS) <http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/>
- LINCS Health & Literacy Special Collection <http://healthliteracy.worlded.org/>
- Medical Librarian Association: MLANet <http://www.mlanet.org/resources/healthlit/>
- Medscape health literacy CME program <http://www.medscape.com/viewprogram/8603>
- National Center for Education Statistics (NAAL) <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/> (then click “Assessment of...”)
- National Center for Family Literacy <http://www.famlit.org/>
- National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy <http://www.ncsall.net/>
- National Council on Patient Education and Information <http://www.talkaboutrx.org/index.jsp>
- National Institute for Literacy <http://www.nifl.gov>

- National Institutes of Health <http://www.nih.gov/icd/od/ocpl/resources/mprovinghealthliteracy.htm>
- National Library of Medicine Current Bibliographies <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/archive/20061214/pubs/cbm/hliteracy.html>
- National Literacy and Health Program (Canada) <http://www.nlhp.cpha.ca/>
- Partnership for Clear Health Communication <http://www.askme3.org/>
- Pfizer Clear Health Communication Initiative <http://www.pfizerhealthliteracy.com/>
- Plain Language Action & Information Network <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>
- Plain Language Association International <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org>
- Project Shine MetLife Health Literacy Initiative <http://www.projectshine.org/healthliteracy/geninfo.htm>
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation <http://www.rwjf.org>
- University of Virginia <http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/som-hlc/>
- Vanderbilt Program on Effective Health Communication <http://medicine.mc.vanderbilt.edu/healthcomm>

Selected Publications

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *Literacy and Health Outcomes* Evidence Report/Technology Assessment Number 87. AHRQ Publication No. 04-E007-2, January 2004. Summary at <http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcsums/litsum.htm> full report from <http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcindex.htm>. Printed copies from 1-800-358-9295 or e-mail to ahrqpubs@ahrq.gov. Other literacy-related publications at <http://www.ahrq.gov/path/beactive.htm>
- American College of Physicians Foundation and Institute of Medicine, 2006 National Health Communication Conference. Executive Summary available at http://foundation.acponline.org/files/hcc5_exsum.pdf. Print copy available from Jonathan Uhl at juhl@mail.acponline.org, or call (215) 351-2819.
- American Medical Association, *Understanding Health Literacy. Implications for Medicine and Public Health*. https://catalog.ama-assn.org/Catalog/product/product_detail.jsp?productId=prod240170 or visit <http://www.amapress.com> then search literacy
- Center for Health Care Strategies, <http://www.chcs.org>, nine fact sheets, each covering an important aspect of health literacy, and bibliography.
- Doak CC, Doak LG, Root J. *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills* (2nd ed). <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/doak.html>
- *Healthy People 2010*, Chapter 11: Health Communication <http://www.healthypeople.gov/document/HTML/Volume1/11HealthCom.htm>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Simply Put*. <http://www.cdc.gov/communication/resources/simpput.pdf>
- Institute of Medicine, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*. <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10883.html> or <http://www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=19723>
- Joint Commission, health literacy white paper. http://www.jointcommission.org/NR/rdonlyres/D5248B2E-E7E6-4121-8874-99C7B4888301/0/improving_health_literacy.pdf
- *Journal of General Internal Medicine* Special Issue on Health Literacy. <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/toc/jgi/21/8>
- National Cancer Institute, *Clear and Simple*. <http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinformation/clearandsimple>
- National Library of Medicine, Current Bibliographies in Medicine: Understanding Health Literacy and Its Barriers, 651 citations, January 1998-November 2003 plus selected earlier and later citations <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/archive/20061214/pubs/cbm/hliteracy.html>
- Reference list of health literacy research, Harvard Health Literacy Studies. <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/literature.html>
- Pfizer Clear Health Communication Initiative health literacy materials <http://www.pfizerhealthliteracy.com/physicians-providers/materials.html>
- Surgeon General Richard Carmona, June 14, 2003, "Health Literacy in America: The Role of Health Care Professionals" <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/news/speeches/ama061403.htm> or <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/publichealthpriorities.html#literacy>
- VALNET Health Literacy Resources, September 2004: <http://www.mdmlg.org/Health-Literacy-Resources.pdf>
- White House Conference on Aging, Health Literacy and Health Disparities Mini-Conference, Jul 21, 2005 Final Report: http://www.whcoa.gov/about/policy/meetings/mini_conf/07_21_05_FINAL.pdf Summary & Recommendations: http://www.whcoa.gov/about/policy/meetings/mini_conf/HLHD_07_2005.pdf

Low Health Literacy

Facts: Affects approx 1/3 of patients

Many are ashamed to admit it, or cover it up

- Can't tell by looking!

Red flags:

- Seek help only when illness is advanced
- Have difficulty explaining concerns
- Seldom or never have any questions
- May pretend they can read
- Lack of follow-through with tests/appts
- Can't describe how to take meds

Health Literacy Teaching Triggers

- Patient described as “non-compliant”
- Patient's chronic disease poorly managed
- Patient on more than four medications
- Learner is adding a new medication to patient regimen
- Learner is recommending new test for patient

HEALTH LITERACY TOOLS

AS CLINICIAN AND **TEACHER**

1. Explain clearly in plain language
 - Slow pace, be specific, non-medical words
 - Would my mom/brother/aunt understand?*
 - Direct observation of learner critical here***
2. Use ‘teach-back’ to confirm understanding
 - How: “*I have difficulty explaining things sometimes. Can you describe back to me what we have just talked about?*”
 - Direct observation of learner critical here***
3. Effectively Solicit Questions
 - Be open: What questions do you have?
 - Avoid: Do you have any questions?
 - Direct observation of learner critical here***
4. Focus on key concepts, and repeat them
 - Only 2 to 3 new concepts are retained*
 - Help learner choose what to focus on***
5. Use patient-friendly health education materials
 - Review all patient ed. materials before providing. Are they at 5th grade level?***

Adapted from: Safe Communication Universal Precautions (AMA)