Objectives

- Define levels of literacy and health literacy
- Recognize the “red flags” for low health literacy
- Understand the impact of low health literacy
- Identify strategies to improve patient understanding
Which of the following is the strongest predictors of an individual’s health status?

A) Age  
B) Income  
C) Literacy skills  
D) Education level  
E) Racial or ethnic group  
F) ETOH intake
**Literacy**

**Illiteracy:** total inability to read and write

**Functional Illiteracy:** ability to only read/write/understand below 5th grade level

**Marginal Literacy:** ability to only read/write/understand between the 5th and 8th grade level

**Literacy:** ability to read/write/understand at the 8th grade level and above
Degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information to make appropriate health decisions.
Scope of Problem

22% of adult Americans are functionally illiterate; an additional 27.5% are marginally literate

Therefore, nearly half of American adults (90 million patients) do not have sufficient literacy skills to fully function in society

According to a national survey, over one-third of the adult population has limited health literacy, meaning that they have basic or below basic health literacy levels
US Rate of Health Literacy

- **88%** of adults aged 16 and older did not have proficient health literacy.
- **4%** of adults with an associate’s or 2-year degree and **3%** of adults with a 4-year college degree or graduate degree are estimated to have Below Basic health literacy.
- Of the adults who never attended or did not complete high school, nearly half (**49%**) had Below Basic health literacy.
- Adults who were ages 65 and older had lower average health literacy than adults in younger age groups.
- **80%** of adults with Below Basic health literacy skills reported getting *none* of their health care information from the Internet.
Increasing focus...
“As a former nurse, trauma surgeon, and public health director [I realized] there was a wall between us and the people we were trying to serve.

Health care professionals do not recognize that patients do not understand the health information we are trying to communicate.

We must close the gap between what health care professionals know and what the rest of America understands.”

Dr. Richard Carmona, 
Former U.S. Surgeon General

mentioned health literacy in 200 of last 260 speeches
Our Expectations of Patients are Increasing...

- Prevention
- Immunization
- Self Assessment of Health Status
- Self-treatment
- Health Care Use
  - When to go to clinic/ ER
  - Referrals and follow-up
  - Insurance/ Medicare
Why Is Health Literacy Important?

Affects people’s ability to:

- Navigate the healthcare system, including locating providers and services and filling out forms
- Share personal and health information with providers
- Engage in self-care and chronic disease management
- Adopt health-promoting behaviors, such as exercising and eating a healthy diet
- Act on health-related news and announcements
Education as an Unreliable Indicator of Literacy Level

- Number of years of education not equal to amount learned
- 24% of Functionally Illiterate (NALS Level 1) people actually completed high school
Red Flags for low health literacy

✓ Frequently missed appointments
✓ Incomplete registration forms
✓ Non-compliance with medication
✓ Unable to name medications, explain purpose or dosing
✓ Identifies pills by looking at them, not reading label
✓ Unable to give coherent, sequential history
✓ Ask fewer questions
✓ Lack of follow-through on tests or referrals
✓ Eyes wandering over a page; very slow to finish; sounding out words; looking confused
Responses

“I forgot my glasses”

“Let me take this home so I can discuss it with my children”
Implications

Low health literacy patients have:

- More medication errors
- Excess hospitalizations
- Longer hospital stays
- More E.D. visits
- Generally higher level of illness
- Inadequate knowledge and care for chronic health conditions

**RESULT**: An excess cost of $50-73 billion per year to the US healthcare system
Outcomes

• Poor Health Outcomes
• Over-utilization of health services
• Limited effectiveness of treatment
• Higher patient dissatisfaction
• Higher provider frustration
“How would you take this medicine?”

395 primary care patients in 3 states

- 46% did not understand instructions ≥ 1 labels
- 38% with adequate literacy missed at least 1 label

Take two tablets by mouth twice daily.

Humibid LA 600MG
1 refill
Rates of Correct Understanding vs. Demonstration “Take Two Tablets by Mouth Twice Daily”

![Bar chart showing correct understanding and demonstration rates by patient literacy level.](image-url)

- Low Literacy: Understanding = 71%, Demonstration = 35%
- Marginal Literacy: Understanding = 84%, Demonstration = 63%
- Adequate Literacy: Understanding = 89%, Demonstration = 80%

*Davis TC, et al. Annals Int Med 2006*
Health Literacy and Shame

People with limited health literacy often report feeling a sense of shame about their skill level.

Individuals with poor literacy skills are often uncomfortable about being unable to read well, and they develop strategies to compensate.
Not stupid
All social classes
Amazingly able to function

The majority of people with low literacy skills are white, native-born Americans

Health providers should not have racial/ethnic bias
What can we do?

A. Make our practice patient-friendly

B. Communicate in an easy-to-understand language

C. Create and use patient-friendly written materials
Communication

Steps to improve communication with patients

1. slow down
2. use plain, non-medical language
3. limit the amount of information provided, and repeat it
4. show or draw pictures
5. use teach-back or show-me technique
6. create a shame-free environment
“... half of our adult population has deficiencies in reading or computational skills.” (AMA Council on Scientific Affairs, JAMA 1999)

Do your patients understand what you are telling them?
Lessons Learned From Patients

Tell me what’s wrong (briefly)

What do I need to DO & why

Emphasize **benefits** (for me)

If meds, *break it down for me*:

1. What it is for
2. How to take (concretely)
3. Why (benefit)
4. What to expect

Remember: what’s clear to you is clear to you!
Strategies to Improve Patient Understanding

• Focus on ‘need-to-know’ & ‘need-to-do’
• *Use “Teach Back”*
• Demonstrate/ draw pictures
• Use clearly written education materials
Ensuring agreement and understanding about the care plan is essential to achieving adherence

“I want to make sure I explained it correctly. Can you tell me in your words how you understand the plan?”

Some evidence that use of “teach-back” is associated with better diabetes control

Schillinger, D. Archives of Internal Med, 2003
Teach-back

- Explain
- Assess
- Clarify
- Understanding
“Tell me what you’ve understood”

“I want to make sure I explained your medicine clearly. Can you tell me how you will take your medicine?”

Do you understand?

Do you have any questions?
Questions to Consider

Looking back, have there been instances when you suspected, or now suspect, that a patient might have low literacy? What were the signs?

Do we do things in our practice that make it easier for patients with low literacy to understand services and information?

What strategies could all of us adopt to minimize barriers and misunderstanding for low literacy patients?
Thank you for your attention!

Stay Tuned for Summer “Growing” Quality Series
Session II: Survival Skills
Health Literacy
Universal Precautions
Toolkit

Simply Put
A guide for creating easy-to-understand materials

Health Literacy Resources
Developed by
Janet Schneider
Patient Education Librarian
On behalf of the
CONSUMER HEALTH LIBRARY PANEL
May 2008

Safe Communication
Universal Precautions

Medical information can be hard for anyone to understand. Yet, communication is the heart of health care relationships. Health literacy barriers to effective communication include:

- Difficulty obtaining, processing and understanding health information.
- Health care system complexity.
- Practice pressures.
- Cultural and language issues.
- Lack of clinician training on effective communication strategies.

At least 50 percent of U.S. adults are at increased risk for serious consequences due to low health literacy. Those at risk often hide their problems understanding health information, which can lead to:

- Misunderstood health care instructions, prescriptions and appointment slips.
- Poorer health outcomes.

Health Literacy and Cultural Competency

You Are Here: AHRQ Home > Browse > Health Literacy and Cultural Competency

- Sign Up for Health Literacy and Cultural Competency E-Mail Updates
- Overview
- Consumer/Patient Resources
- Health Literacy
- Cultural and Linguistic Competency
How To Use This Tool Effectively

1. **Approach patients in a warm and caring manner.** Our healthcare system can be daunting and intimidating to people not accustomed to it. Use understanding and patience as you guide your culturally diverse patients through the system and as you respond to their needs and expectations.

2. **Ask questions.** Use the generalized material about each cultural group and from those, ask about practices, nutritional needs, etc.

3. **Share your learnings with your fellow practitioners.** It takes tact and hard work to be a cultural detective. Some practitioners will be more successful than others. Facilitate a patient's ability to experience holistic care from all practitioners, not just one or two.

4. **Thoroughly investigate the patient's eating habits and lifestyle before.**

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**Select Groups**
- Ethnic Groups
- Religious Groups
- Additional Communities

**Culture News You Can**
