



EASY WAYS TO IMPROVE PATIENTS' HEALTH LITERACY

Health Literacy is **“the ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions.”**¹ The National Assessment of Adult Literacy reports that only 12 percent of U.S. adults (11 percent among the military insured population) have proficient health literacy skills.² Those who lack proficiency can struggle with tasks that could potentially impact their health, such as following instructions on a prescription drug bottle or understanding a standardized chart to determine childhood immunization schedules. Additionally, research shows that patients with limited literacy are less likely to ask their health care provider questions.³ Putting simple tips into practice can help health care providers improve their patient’s health literacy. Helping Sailors and Marines in your care understand information and instructions ultimately results in better patient health and care.

How you can help^{4,5}



Encourage your patient to write down important information and instructions about their diagnosis, treatment plan, medications, and making follow-up or specialist appointments so they remember what you spoke about or instructions given.



Provide easy-to-understand educational materials about their health concern in conjunction with your spoken descriptions and instructions. Don’t just depend on brochures; use audio-visual materials, cartoon illustrations, video tutorials, podcasts, and photo-novellas which are easier for people with limited health literacy to understand.

A, B, C

Use plain language and simplify communication. Unless you know your patient really well, you likely don’t know his or her prior health knowledge, or if they understand or need extra assistance. Don’t use medical jargon, acronyms, or a lot of technical details unless asked. Define any medical terminology used. Consider using pictures, diagrams, or metaphors to help clarify and explain the information.



Ensure your patient understands what you’ve said by asking him or her to repeat instructions or restate the diagnosis and treatment plan. Clarify any misunderstandings. Encourage your patient to ask questions and ensure their questions have been answered. If appropriate and agreeable to the patient, invite a family member or caregiver to join the conversation to hear the diagnosis, care plan, and next steps.



Help overcome a language barrier, hearing, or cognition problems by letting the patient know he or she is free to bring a friend or family member who can help communicate. You can also request interpreter services or invite a bilingual staff member to join the discussion.

¹ America’s Health Literacy: Why We Need Accessible Health Information. U.S Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion., Health Communication Activities. <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/issuebrief/>. Published 2008. Accessed 4 September 2014.

² Ibid

³ Katz, M, Jacobson, T, Veledar, E, et al. Patient literacy and question-asking behavior during the medical encounter: A mixed-methods analysis. Journal of General Internal Medicine. 2007;22(6):782-786.

⁴ Brach, C, Keller, D, Hernandez, LM, Baur, C, Parker, R, Dreyer, B, Schyve, P, Lemerise, AJ, Schillinger, D. Ten Attributes of Health Literate Health Care Organizations Discussion Paper. http://iom.edu/~media/Files/Perspectives-Files/2012/Discussion-Papers/BPH_Ten_HLit_Attributes.pdf Published June 2010. Accessed 4 September 2014.

⁵ Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. Health Literacy: Addressing Communication Barriers to Foster Patient Self-Care and Family Care. http://www.cstsonline.org/wp-content/resources/CTC_health_literacy_addressing_communication_barriers.pdf. Accessed 4 September 2014.