

Implications of Low Health Literacy and Strategies to Overcome It

“THE MAIN PROBLEM WITH COMMUNICATION IS THE ASSUMPTION THAT IT HAS OCCURRED.”

-GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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Family Medicine Clerkship, Oct. 17.-Nov.18, 2016
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Objectives

1. Define health literacy
2. Review prevalence and implications of low health literacy
3. Describe 5 strategies for improving patient understanding
4. Review Teach-Back as an approach to assess and improve patient understanding
5. Understand how improving patient understanding can overcome low health literacy

What is health literacy?

The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health info and services.¹

Health Literacy Statistics

How good are we at assessing health literacy?

- In a study of residents, only 10% of patients were identified as having poor health literacy, yet the actual number was >30%²
- Over 36% of all US adults have basic or below basic health literacy¹
- Low health literacy is more common among³:
 - Elderly
 - Men
 - Racial/Ethnic Minorities
 - Low Socioeconomic Status

At EMMC CFM:

- Elderly- 11%
- Men- 49.6%
- 77 patients prefer a non-English language

Implications of Low Health Literacy

- **Poorer health outcomes¹**
 - Greater chance of medication errors
 - Lower rates of treatment adherence
 - Higher hospitalization rates
 - Worse overall health status
 - Higher mortality rates
- **Health disparities¹**
- **Increased costs**
 - Systems level: Additional costs of limited HL range from **3-5%** of the total health care cost per year⁴
 - Patient level: Additional expenditures per year per person w/ limited HL compared to persons w/ adequate HL range from **\$143-\$7,798⁴**

What techniques do you use to increase patient understanding?

Suggestions to Improve Patient Understanding

1. Speak slowly and avoid medical jargon
2. Break information into small, concrete steps
3. Encourage patient participation
4. Provide printed materials
5. Assess for comprehension

Apply these techniques universally!

1. Speak slowly and simply

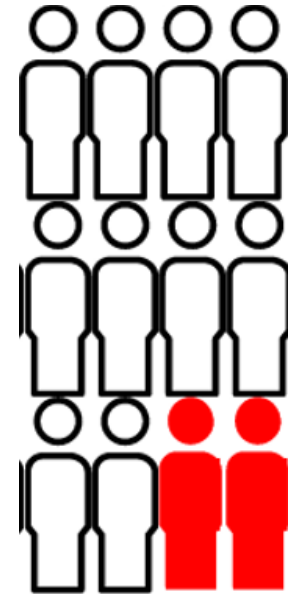
Use this... ⁹	Instead of this...
reduces swelling	anti-inflammatory
weak bone disease	osteoporosis
not cancer	benign
heart doctor	cardiologist
take before meals	take on an empty stomach
low blood sugar	hypoglycemia
fats	lipids

Additional Resource: Plain Language Thesaurus, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Be Aware of Limited Numerical Literacy

2/3 of patients in an asthma clinic did not understand what 1% meant⁶

- Express probabilities as natural frequencies¹
“1 out of 20 people” instead of “5% of people”
- Use both positives and negatives to express risk
“...happens in less than 1 out of 1,000 people. In other words, it doesn't happen in 999 people”
- Use visuals whenever possible



2. Break information down

- Focus on “**Need-to-know**” and “**Need-to-do**”¹⁰
 - Medications
 - Self-care & prevention
 - Checking out
 - Referrals & Follow-up
- **3 key points** per visit

What patients want to hear:

Medications:

- What is it for?
- How do I take it? (be specific!)
- What are the benefits to taking it?
- What should I expect? (side effects)

Patients forget an estimated 75% of information presented⁷

3. Encourage patient participation

- Body Language
- Encourage patients to ask questions – “What questions do you have?”
 - Patients should leave each health encounter understanding¹¹:
 1. What is my main problem?
 2. What do I need to do?
 3. Why is it important for me to do this?
- Ask for patient feedback

4. Provide printed materials

Effective & Patient-Preferred Strategies¹²:

- Graphics & pictograms in addition to written instructions
- Use short words, bolding/underlining, bullets, icons, subheadings
- Go through materials verbally with patient, highlighting key points & personalizing information!
- Home accessible resources

5. Assess for comprehension

- Chunk and Check
- Teach-Back

Public health nurse: “Jill, I see you are taking birth control pills. Tell me how you are taking them.”

Jill: “Well, some days I take three; some days I don't take any. On weekends I usually take more.”

Public health nurse: “How did your doctor tell you to take them?”

Jill: “He said these pills were to keep me from getting pregnant when I have sex, so I take them anytime I have sex.”

This story is true. Jill is a single woman, age 21 years, who works as a house cleaner. She reads at about the second-grade level.

Graham S, Brookey J. Do Patients Understand? *The Permanente Journal*. 2008;12(3):67-69.

Teach-Back⁵

What is Teach-Back?

- Asking patients to repeat *in their own words* what they need to know or do, in a non-shaming way
- Presented not as a test of the patient, but of how well *you* as the provider explained a concept
- A chance to check for understanding and re-teach if necessary

Who should you use Teach-Back with?

- Everyone!

Where should you use Teach-Back?

- Clinic
 - New medications
 - Informed consent
 - Goals of care
- Hospital
 - Discharge instructions
- Home Health
 - Self-care techniques

When should you use Teach-Back?

- In place of asking, “Do you understand?”

How do you use Teach-Back?

- Ask patients to demonstrate understanding
 - *“I want to be sure I explained everything clearly. Can you please explain it back to me so I can be sure that I did?”*
 - *“What will you tell your spouse about your condition?”*
 - *“Can you show me how you would use your inhaler at home?”*
- Summarize and check for understanding periodically, as you go. Do not wait until the end.

Why should you use Teach-Back?

- It is supported by research!
 - One of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's top 11 patient safety strategies⁵
 - Studies have shown it can improve chronic disease management
 - When physicians used interactive communication techniques like Teach-Back, diabetic patients had better glycemic control⁸
- It is an opportunity to check understanding with patient, and re-teach if necessary
 - Re-phrase if patient is not able to repeat information accurately
 - Consider strategies including pictures, videos, analogies
 - Ask patient to repeat the information again, until you are comfortable that they really understood it

Implementing Teach-Back

- Ultimately, skilled Teach-Back users report it only adds about 1 minute to office visits
- Start small and build up
 - Write down one question to ask at the end of each visit
 - *“What did we talk about?”*
 - *“What are you going to do when you go home?”*
- Talk with patients about the importance of Teach-Back and why it’s being used
- Practice!

Take Away Points

- Over $\frac{1}{3}$ of **US adults** have a low level of health literacy
- Low health literacy has an impact on **health outcomes** and **healthcare costs**
- **Multiple strategies** can be used to enhance and assess patient understanding to overcome low health literacy

“We want to make sure that we explained things clearly. Can you explain to us what strategies you can use in your next patient encounter to improve patient understanding?”

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