



What is health literacy?

Health literacy is about more than being able to read. Health literacy means using many different skills to get, understand, communicate and use information to make informed decisions about health and to navigate the health care system.

Many people struggle to use health information or navigate healthcare services, especially if they are anxious, in pain, tired or recovering from an illness. Past experiences and cultural background may also influence how people navigate the healthcare system, ask or not ask questions, and share information with their healthcare providers. How we communicate makes a difference!

You can't tell by looking who might have low health literacy or is struggling with health information. Even people with high levels of education or who are healthcare professionals themselves can struggle to manage their care.

Potential Barriers

People are constantly using health literacy skills to manage their care and navigate the system. For example, health literacy skills are required to:

- follow instructions for taking medicines
- prepare before a test or surgery
- act on medical advice and fill out medical forms
- understand treatments and medical terms
- find and use health information
- know where to go to get health services from home or in the community
- ask questions and advocate for oneself or a family member

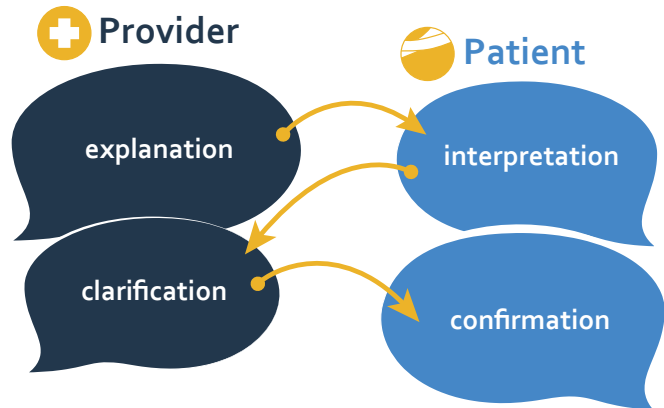
Because health literacy can be a struggle for anyone, it is important to provide clear and easy-to-use information and discharge instructions every time. Clearly written messages help your patients manage their care after leaving the hospital.



Ways to Help

Use teach back as a way to assess understanding.

Ask your patient or family caregiver to demonstrate or explain to you what you have just done or discussed in their own words. So, instead of asking “Do you understand?”, ask questions to get them to show you what they have actually learned, such as: “What will you tell your family about today?” or “How will you take your medicines at work?”. If they are not able to teach back correctly, explain again and recheck.



Follow this link for more information about teach back, including demonstration videos and an e-learning module.

Be specific.

Instead of:

“Take this medication 4 times a day.”

Try:

“Take this pill with breakfast, lunch, dinner, and at bedtime.”

Avoid jargon.

Work with your patients and your coworkers to identify jargon and acronyms that you commonly use, and then identify a plain language alternative.

Instead of:

“Don’t take any NSAIDS with this medication,”

Try:

“Don’t take Advil or aspirin with this medication.”

Break down complex information.

When discussing important health information, be sure to break down the information into simple key points. In some cases, diagrams or pictures are better than words.

Instead of:

“Limit your fluids to 4 to 6 cups a day,”

Try to explain:

1

Why fluid restriction is important

2

What types of fluids to limit

3

How this works with the patient’s routine.

Work with friends or family caregivers, too.

Whenever possible and appropriate, provide instructions when your patient has a friend or family caregiver present to help them remember what you say. Remember to still use approaches that meet your patient’s health literacy abilities while also including the family caregiver or friend that is present. Encourage your patient and family caregiver to take notes while you teach and to ask questions.



Focus on the actionable information, or the most important things the patient needs to do or know.

Skip details that are only nice to know, unless your patient asks for this information.



Here are more resources on health literacy, including great tools and tips:

- Health Literacy: **Why is it important to me** (UHN brochure)
- Health Quality Ontario: **Health Literacy Resources**

