

HEALTH LITERACY: ENHANCING PATIENT COMMUNICATION



Limited health literacy can lead to poor health outcomes.
The following tips can help you and your staff
communicate more effectively with your patients.

1. RECOGNIZE POSSIBLE SIGNS OF LOW LITERACY

Patients with low literacy may:

- Have trouble completing forms, providing an accurate medical history, or making appointments.
- Ask fewer questions, not follow through with referrals or medical testing, and be non-compliant with medications or treatments.



2. UTILIZE A TEAM APPROACH

All staff should:

- Identify the health literacy needs of their patients. Share those needs with other staff members while being mindful of patient confidentiality.
- Work with patients to meet their literacy needs. For example, staff members can assist patients with completion of forms.



3. USE PLAIN LANGUAGE

- Speak slowly, clearly, and avoid using medical jargon that patients may not understand. Ask about their preferred language and arrange for translation services if needed.
- Give information in small and manageable steps by limiting discussion to three key messages or points.



4. USE VISUAL AIDS

- Visual aids, such as videos, pictures, and drawings, can enhance patient understanding.
- Written materials should reinforce verbal communication. It is best to write materials at or below a fifth-grade reading level.



5. USE THE TEACH-BACK METHOD

- Along with explaining a task, model the task you ask patients to complete. Then ask patients to perform the task for you to evaluate.
- Rather than testing patients, this method informs how you present information. For example, say, "**I want to make sure I explained how to take this medicine clearly. Can you tell me how you think you will take this medicine?**"



6. PROVIDE A SUPPORTIVE & CARING ENVIRONMENT

- Link patients to community resources, hire bilingual staff, and train all staff on health literacy principals and communication.
- Limit paperwork, keep forms simple, and if needed, offer assistance with completing forms.



7. EMPOWER YOUR PATIENTS

- Ask open vs. closed ended questions to encourage patient communication. For example, instead of "Do you have any questions?" ask "**What questions do you have for me today?**"
- Establish health goals with the patient and create an action plan that outlines steps they can take to achieve them. With the patient's consent, invite family members to participate.



For more information about health literacy for providers and CDC trainings, visit cdc.gov/healthliteracy/education-support/healthcareproviders.html and cdc.gov/healthliteracy/index.html.