



HEALTH LITERACY:

A summary for Clinicians

Health literacy is important to the safety, quality and effectiveness of the health care you deliver.

More than half of your patients do not have the level of health literacy they need to make well-informed healthcare decisions and act on them.

If your patients do not understand the information and services you are providing, then they may be at higher risk of experiencing poor health outcomes.

There are many things that you can do to help your patients better understand their health and health care.

What is health literacy?

We used to think that health literacy was just about how well a person could find, understand and use health information — their skills and abilities and what they know about health.

It is actually much more than this. The way health information and services are provided can also affect what you know and what you do about your health.

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (Commission) talks about two different parts that together shape how people understand health information and services:

Individual health literacy

This is your patients' skills and abilities, how well they can find, understand and act on health information, make health decisions and find and use health services.

Examples include how much the patient already knows about health issues; the way their beliefs might shape their care decisions; how much they know about risks; how confident they are at asking questions; and how skilled they are at balancing options.

The health literacy environment

This includes the systems, processes, people, information and practices that make up the health and health care industries and sector.

Examples include the way information about options about health and health services are provided; information about health and healthcare in the media and the way health systems and processes are set up.

INDIVIDUAL HEALTH LITERACY

Patients' skills, abilities, knowledge and experience

Understanding and being able to act on information about health and health care

HEALTH LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

How easy or hard information or services are to understand

Why is health literacy important?

About 60 per cent of Australians have low individual health literacy.

Health literacy is important because if people cannot find, understand and use health-related information and services, it is hard for them to make well-informed decisions about their health and act on those decisions.

It is hard for them to know which foods to eat, how much they should exercise, which preventive health services they need, how to follow medication instructions, when to contact a doctor, how to decide between treatment options and how to maintain a care plan.

This affects their overall health and care. People with low health literacy are more likely to be hospitalised, to need to go to an emergency department and to have poorer health outcomes.

People with low health literacy are less likely to undertake preventive health activities like mammography and the influenza vaccination, and are less likely to adhere to medication regimens.

They are also less likely to have good knowledge of their own diseases or health conditions.

Older people with low health literacy are likely to have poorer health and a higher risk of premature death.

Ultimately, low health literacy affects the safety and quality of health care.



How can I influence health literacy?

Clinicians have to play a pivotal role in helping people understand their health and health care.

As a clinician, you are one of your patient's main sources of information about health care. You provide written and verbal advice about many aspects of health including:

- **Preventive health**
- **Investigations and diagnostic procedures**
- **Treatment and medical procedures**
- **Medications and medication management**
- **Referrals and care pathways**
- **Navigating through the health system**
- **Expected costs and processes**
- **Forms including consent**

Some of these things may be quite straightforward and easy-to-understand, some may be more complex and others may seem simple to some people but confusing to others.

There can be considerable variation in the skills and abilities amongst those with low individual health literacy. For example, one person might find it easy to follow a complex medication regimen, but difficult to arrange home care for an aged parent, while another person might find the opposite.

In addition, an individual's health literacy also fluctuates over time. People may find it easier to understand and act on advice when well, but harder during a time of stress or illness.

Universal precautions approach

The problem is you cannot tell which people have low health literacy just by looking at them, and you cannot tell what one person will understand or not understand.

You should assume that your patients may not understand the information you provide and the advice you give about navigating their way through the health system.

This is the universal precautions approach to health literacy.

What can I do to address health literacy?

As a clinician, you influence how your patients' understand health information and the action they take.

The information that you provide contributes to their individual health literacy. How you provide that information forms part of your patients' health literacy environment.

You can ease the burden on your patients through the way you communicate and present information. You can:

- Assume that most people will find it difficult to understand complex health information and concepts, and adapt accordingly
- Recognise the needs and preferences of individual patients and tailor your communication style to the person's situation
- Use a range of interpersonal communication strategies to confirm that the information you provide has been understood

- Encourage people to speak up if they have difficulty understanding the information provided
- Use ways of communicating risk information about treatment options that are known to be effective such as shared decision-making tools
- Participate in improvement projects aimed at reducing barriers to health literacy within your working environment

You can also contribute to improvements to the health literacy environment by getting involved in system and information improvement projects and leading and supporting colleagues to understand and address health literacy.



The benefits of improving health literacy

Taking steps to ensure your patients understand and can act on the information and services you provide can help you to reduce the risk of harm to your patients.

Taking action to address health literacy in the work that you do can help you:

Communicate more effectively with your patients

Be confident you have all the information you need from your patient to diagnose and treat them

Increase the likelihood your patient will **adhere to your advice** around diet, physical activity, medication and other treatment regimens

Reduce the likelihood of your patients experiencing **poorer outcomes**.



It will also help your patients to:

Know where to go, what to do and how to find what they need to improve their health and wellbeing and that of their family

Ask questions when they don't understand something you have said

Make better decisions about their health, wellbeing and health care and that of their family.

What is the Commission doing?

The Commission is working to build national action on health literacy. It is also working to support healthcare organisations to improve their health literacy environment.

Because so many different things can influence a person's health literacy, many people and organisations need to work together in different ways to address health literacy.

A national coordinated approach to health literacy needs to use a range of strategies to:

- **Embed health literacy into systems**
- **Ensure effective communication**
- **Integrate health literacy into education**

Links to further information and resources

Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care Health literacy Taking action for safety and quality

<http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Health-Literacy-Taking-action-to-improve-safety-and-quality.pdf>

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality: Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit

<http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/healthliteracytoolkit.pdf>

NSW Clinical Excellence Commission: Health Literacy Guide

<http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/hlg>

Rudd and Anderson: The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Centers

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/files/2012/09/healthliteracyenvironment.pdf>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Health literacy web site

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/index.html>



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