

What is Health Literacy?

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, Title V, defines health literacy as the degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions. Health literacy can be the result of Limited English Proficiency (LEP), cultural communication barriers, or medical or workplace jargon that the provider has not clearly defined for the patient.

Why does it matter?

The CDC estimates health literacy is a barrier for as many as 9 out of 10 adults. Poor health literacy results in higher costs to public health systems, unnecessary hospitalizations, and poorer health outcomes for those affected. (CDC, 2016)

What can we do?

The US Department of Health & Human Services has developed [Culturally Linguistically Appropriate Services \(CLAS\) Standards](#) for care providers. CLAS Standards outline ways for providers and healthcare organizations to offer services tailored to the populations they serve. Providers can advance health equity and reduce health disparities by communicating with patients in a way that is respectful of the patient's culture, beliefs, and language capabilities. To do this, providers must know the community they serve and work to educate themselves on culturally appropriate communication for their community. Providers can also assist their patients in improving their health literacy skills so they may better understand public health messages and make more informed decisions about their own health.

Resources

The [Alabama Health Literacy Initiative](#) offers [assessment tools](#) providers can use to evaluate their patient education materials and make patient information clear and easy to understand for all literacy levels.

The CDC has posted guidelines organizations can follow to [develop a health literacy plan](#).

Health literacy is extremely important for compliance. If a pt doesn't understand how HIV works, they will never feel that it is important to take their medication.

- Jai Ellerson, NP, MAO Provider

Health literacy is probably the most important part of healthcare. It is so much more important today than it was 20 years ago. With all of the information available at your fingertips it is important to talk with patients about what sites are credible and effective as well as how to communicate their needs to all healthcare providers. I communicate with patients at their level and this means being creative and culturally aware. I give the information that they need in a way that makes them comfortable while leaving plenty of time of questions. I always encourage patients to write down or record their random thoughts when they leave so that its available in their own words when they return. The best questions most often occur in the middle of the night or at random times. Patients have to be made to feel like they are an important part of the process, there has to participation and buy in and you can only achieve

that by selling health in a way that benefits them. If patients don't understand and are not able to apply the need to their current condition they will not participate in the plan. I never say "I know what you're going through" I always ask them to tell me about their experience and ask how I can help them do.....whatever it is they are coming to see me for hypertension, sexual health etc. Adjustments I make are internally with me first, then body language and finally I sit with them if it's one on one. Adjustments in large settings depends upon the audience and information I am trying to really, but all of it requires you to be culturally aware and sensitive.

-Rozetta Roberts, NP, MAO Clinic Director

We try to use words that patient understand, elementary education. We say it in different ways. We ask them to repeat it back in their own language.

- Marguerite Barber-Owens, MD, MAO Provider

For the clients who seem to be a bit more difficult of understanding basic information, I usually adjust the way that I explain things to them regarding their health. Actually all of team members do. I have found that the more simple you are the better.

– Bretia Gordon, PhD