



NETWORK PROVIDER FAX BLAST

Health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information needed to make appropriate health decisions and services needed to prevent or treat illness.

Only 12% of adults have proficient health literacy, according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. That means that nearly **nine out of ten adults** may lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease.

Members with limited literacy skills have less understanding of medication instructions and less knowledge about their medical conditions and self-care instructions. One study found that among people with low health literacy skills: 26% did not understand when their next appointment was scheduled; 42% did not understand instructions to take medication on an empty stomach; and 86% could not understand the rights and responsibilities section of a Medicaid application.

Low literacy has been linked to poor health outcomes such as higher rates of hospitalization and less frequent use of preventive services. Both of these outcomes are associated with higher healthcare costs.

Low Health Literacy is More Common Among:

- Older adults
- Minority populations
- Those who have low socioeconomic status

Members with Low Health Literacy May Have Difficulty:

- Locating providers and services
- Filling out health forms such as a medical history or consent form
- Sharing their medical history with providers
- Seeking preventive health care
- Knowing the connection between risky behaviors and health
- Managing chronic health conditions
- Understanding directions on medicine

Members' Health Literacy May be Affected if They Have:

- Providers who use words they don't understand
- Low educational skills
- Cultural barriers
- Limited English Proficiency



How to Identify a Member with Low Health Literacy?

There are behaviors and reactions that may provide an indication that members have low health literacy. Those may include members' reaction to written information, non-compliance with self-care instructions, and responses to questions about health history or medications. Some behaviors that warrant attention include:

Member Behaviors at the Health Care Setting:

- Member registration forms are incomplete or inaccurately filled out.
- Members frequently miss appointments.
- Members are non-compliant with medication regimens.
- Members do not follow through with laboratory tests or referrals to specialists.
- A member says that he/she is taking medication, but lab tests or other parameters do not show expected changes.

Member Avoidance when Receiving Written Information:

- "I forgot my glasses. I'll read this when I get home."
- "I forgot my glasses. Can you read this to me?"
- "Let me bring this home so I can discuss it with my children."

Member Cannot:

- Name his or her medications.
- Explain why he or she is taking the medication.
- Explain how often the medication is taken.

How Providers Can Help:

- Use simple language, short sentences and avoid technical terms.
 - *See next page for Words to Watch-Fact Sheet as a reference.*
- Identify members with limited literacy levels.
- Provide appropriate educational materials (pamphlets, pictures, etc.)
- Use the 'Teach Back' method - Ask members to explain instructions to demonstrate their understanding.
- Avoid closed-ended questions that end with yes or no.
- Highlight and repeat the most important points.
- Consider the age, cultural, ethnic and racial diversity of members.
- For Limited English Proficiency members, provide information in their primary language
- Offer assistance with completing forms

Sources and Helpful Links:

- HRSA, About Health Literacy, <http://www.hrsa.gov/publichealth/healthliteracy/healthlitabout.html>
- Quick Guide to Health Literacy, <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsbasic.htm>
- University of Washington Medical Center, UW Medicine, Patient Health Literacy For UWMC Clinicians, 06/2005, Rev. 09/2008, UH2232
- AHRQ, Health Literacy universal Precautions Toolkit, 2nd Edition



Words to Watch - Fact Sheet

Many people, even highly literate people, have trouble understanding words used in health care. In some instances, a word may be totally unfamiliar. In other cases, a word may be familiar, but the person may not understand it in a health care context.

For example, upon hearing “keep your glucose in a normal range,” people know what normal means about a person, and they may have a range in their kitchen, but they may miss the intended concept in terms of health care. Even people who understand the concept may need more information than the phrase provides. They need to be told what glucose measurements are considered normal.

Words with a Latin or Greek prefix present special problems. The health science field is full of such words. Here is a small sampling: pre-op, post-op, prenatal, premature, unsweetened, decontaminate, antibacterial. For example, the risk factor for poor readers with diabetes is that they may recognize one part of the word, such as the sweetened in unsweetened, and then skip the un. This kind of guessing can lead to the opposite behavior.

Four kinds of words cause much of the misunderstanding:

- Medical words
- Value judgment words
- Concept words
- Category words

Often these kinds of words can be made understandable by explaining them with common words, by an example, or by a visual.

Medical Word Examples: Words frequently used by doctors and in health care instructions.

| Problem Word | Consider Using |
|---------------------|---|
| Ailment | Sickness, illness, problem with your health |
| Benign | Will not cause harm; is not cancer |
| Condition | How you feel; health problem |
| Dysfunction | Problem |
| Inhibitor | Drug that stops something that is bad for you |
| Intermittent | Off and on |
| Lesion | Wound; sore; infected patch of skin |
| Oral | By mouth |
| Procedure | Something done to treat your problem; operation |
| Vertigo | Dizziness |

Value Judgment Word Examples: Words that may need an example or visual to convey their meaning with clarity.

| Problem Word | Consider Using |
|---------------------|--|
| Adequate | Enough <i>Example (adequate water): 6-8 glasses a day</i> |
| Adjust | Fine-tune; change |
| Cautiously | With care; slowly <i>Example: making sure to hold on to handrails</i> |
| Excessive | Too much <i>Example (bleeding): if blood soaks through the bandage</i> |
| Increase gradually | Add to <i>Example (exercise): add 5 minutes a week</i> |
| Moderately | Not too much <i>Example (exercise): so you don't get out of breath</i> |
| Progressive | Gets worse (or better) |
| Routinely | Often <i>Example: every week; every other day</i> |
| Significantly | Enough to make a difference <i>Example (smoking/ heart disease): 2 times the chance of having heart disease</i> |
| Temporary | For a limited time; for about (an hour, day...) <i>Example: for less than a week</i> |

Concept Word Examples: Words used to describe an idea, metaphor, or notion.

| Problem Word | Consider Using |
|---------------------|--|
| Active role | Taking part in |
| Avoid | Stay away from; do not use (or eat) |
| Collaborate | Work together |
| Factor | Other thing |
| Gauge | Measure; get a better idea of; test (dependent on context) |
| Intake | What you eat or drink; what goes into your body |
| Landmark | Very important (adj.) Important event; turning point (n.) |
| Option | Choice |
| Referral | Ask you to see another doctor; get a second opinion |
| Wellness | Good health; feeling good |

Category Word Examples: Words that describe a group or sub-set, and may be unfamiliar.

| Problem Word | Consider Using |
|-------------------------|---|
| Activity | Something you do; something you do often, like driving a car |
| Adverse (reaction) | Bad |
| Cognitive | Learning; thinking |
| Hazardous | Not safe; dangerous |
| High-intensity exercise | Use an example, such as running |
| Generic | Product sold without a brand name, like ibuprofen (Advil is brand name) |
| Noncancerous | Not cancer |
| Poultry | Chicken, turkey, etc. |
| Prosthesis | Replacement for a body part, such as a man-made arm |
| Support | Help with your needs – for money, friendship, or care |



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Note: This resource was originally developed by the Partnership for Clear Health Communication.

**For more information on health literacy, please
visit www.npsf.org**