

HEALTH LITERACY OVERVIEW

Introduction & Clinical Implications

Health literacy is a person's ability to **understand** health content from multiple sources.^{2,3} Low health literacy consistently leads to various adverse effects in patient clinical care: ^{3,12}

- Higher rates of hospitalizations;
- Higher utilization of emergency care services;
- Lower usage of preventative services, such as screenings and vaccines;
- Higher misuse of medication; and
- Lower understanding of medical instructions.



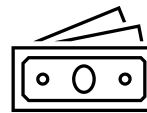
Common Patient Behaviors & Findings

Patients typically experience **shame** about challenges with reading or comprehension and **try to hide this** from their providers.^{10,12} Patients report not wanting to ask providers additional questions that may **reveal** their literacy barriers.^{4,12}

Patients can also express concerns with health literacy through written documentation and/or in-person discussions. Providers should be aware if a patient asks little or no questions, frequently misses appointments, have low engagement, have minimal follow-through, and have psychosomatic symptoms (i.e. headaches). Patients may also tend to forget their reading glasses, indicate that they will read materials later, and prefer to discuss literature with others (e.g., family, friends).¹¹



1 of **5** people in the United States report basic reading skills are a limiting factor. ^{1,6}



8 of **9** adults have low health literacy, which results in higher, preventable healthcare costs.^{7,8}

Best Practices and Strategies

Using visual representation, like icons, graphs, and videos, has been found to **increase comprehension** of health information for all individuals regardless of education level.^{5,9} For optimal benefits, patient health visuals should be written at a **6th grade reading level or below**.¹² This involves the utilization of plain language that a general audience would understand (e.g., saying lung doctor as opposed to pulmonary physician). In addition, there are two primary methods commonly used to address health literacy in patients. The next section describes the **sign posting method**^{1,12} and the **teach-back method**² in more detail.

Implement **sign posting** and **teach back methods**

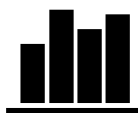
Do not assume **basic** healthcare knowledge

Utilize **plain language**

Do not use medical or healthcare **jargon**



ICONS



GRAPHS



VIDEOS

Sign-Posting Method

Show the treatment regimen in clear steps to help patients to understand by answering the following questions:

- What do I have?
- What caused it?
- How long will it last?
- What are the short-term and long-term consequences?
- How are my treatment options?
- What can I do to prevent further complications?

Sign-Posting is using **visuals** to clearly display each major step in a patient's healthcare process to ensure the patient understands the process. It breaks up treatment regimen into **standalone, concrete steps**.

In the Teach-Back method, it is imperative to **ask patients to repeat the information** back to the provider. These skills should be integrated into **every** touchpoint with a patient.

Teach-Back Method

1. Identify the **most important** information that the patient needs to understand.
2. Ask **open-ended questions** to determine what the patient understands.
3. Emphasize that you are **not testing them**, but you care about their understanding.
4. Ask for **action-oriented explanations**.
5. Check-in **throughout** the appointment rather than only at the end.
6. Provide written instructions in the **patient's own words**.
7. **Debrief** with your team on teach-back implementation.



Developing Appropriate Resources

Applying Universal Response is a continuous process. Resources are available to help ensure verbal and written interactions with patients is the most impactful. You can use the resources below to help reword text in established and new patient-facing documents:

- Test readability: <https://readable.io/text/>
- Generate new sentence structures/verbiage for complex words: <https://rewordify.com/>
- Adult learning literacy education: <https://www.nala.ie/>
- Plain language checklist: <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/checklists/checklist/>

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