Health Literacy: A Prescription for Better Health and Health Care for Rural Residents

Steven Sparks, MS
Health Literacy Director
Literacy Levels

• **Below Basic** — no more than the most simple & concrete literacy skills

• **Basic** — skills needed to perform simple, everyday literacy activities

• **Intermediate** — skills needed to perform moderately challenging activities

• **Proficient** — skills needed for more complex & challenging literacy activities
34-55% of adults are at below basic and basic literacy levels.
A silent problem

Parikh, N.S., et al. 
Patient Educ Couns, 1996
What is Health Literacy?

“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.”

—The Affordable Care Act of 2010
Health Literacy means a person is able to understand:

• Instructions on prescription bottles
• Appointment slips
• Medical brochures, provider instructions and consent forms
• Complex health care systems
• Insurance benefits
Health literacy affected by

1. Literacy skills of patient

2. Communication skills of the provider

3. Demands placed on the patient
Demands of medications

Persons with limited health literacy are less likely to take medications effectively:

• Adherence: 20% greater risk of hospital readmission

• 46% of all literacy levels misunderstood one or more dosage instructions
Health literacy of U.S. Adults

Only 12% proficient!

36% struggle with low health literacy

Below Basic
Basic
Intermediate
Proficient

(NAAL, 2003)
Adults proficient in health literacy

Only 12% proficient!

Only 8% proficient!

12 out of 100 are proficient in health literacy

7 out of 100 are proficient in health literacy

All Adults    Rural Adults
You can’t tell by looking…

• 2013 study:
  
  – 63%: patients with high likelihood of limited health literacy
  
  – 19% estimated by nurses

Who is most at risk for low health literacy?

• Poor health status
  – Poor: 68%

• Low education level
  – Some HS/less than HS Grad: 76%

• Insurance
  – Those on Medicaid: 57%
Who is most at risk for low health literacy?

Ethnicity:

- Entire population 36%
- White 28%
- Native Americans 48%
- Blacks 58%
- Hispanics 66%
Who is most at risk for low health literacy?

• Seniors
  – Seniors 65+: 59%
  – Seniors 75+: 70%

• Persons with Disabilities
  – Persons with physical/other disabilities - 49%
Rural: Greater concentration of low health literacy

More people with characteristics typically associated with low health literacy:

- Poverty
- Age
- Education
- Inadequate/lack of health insurance
- Absence of usual sources of care

Health Literacy and Urbanicity, Halverson et. al, 2013
The challenge of finding health information in rural areas

• Lack of public transit
• Geographic isolation
• Reduced access to health care providers
• Hesitancy to question provider
The rural solution

• Public Health
• Self-reliance
• Dependence on pharmacists, nurses, school nurses
• Churches
• Libraries
• The Internet……but……

“I’ll take care of it myself.”
Internet not always a good option for rural residents

- Internet less reliable
- Options very confusing
- Low literacy reduces internet use
Implications of Low Health Literacy

How health literacy affects what you do every day
Implications: Use of Preventive Services

Persons with limited health literacy skills are more likely to skip preventive measures such as:

• Mammograms
• Pap smears
• Flu shots
Implications: Chronic Conditions

Persons with limited health literacy skills:

• More likely to have chronic conditions and less likely to manage them effectively
• Less knowledge of their illness
• Diabetes: greater risk of death
• Cancer:
  – Later stages of diagnosis
  – Obtain less information from materials
Implications: Hospitalization and Health Status

Persons with limited health literacy skills:

• More preventable hospital visits and admissions.
• More ED visits
• Significantly more likely to report their health as “poor.”
Implications: Mortality

Persons with limited health literacy skills:

• Are more likely to die earlier

Risk of Death

Hazard ratio: 1.75
Implications: Health Care Costs

Low health literacy increases US health care costs by $50-$73 billion annually.*

*National Academy on an Aging Society
Clues to low health literacy

• Incomplete forms
• Missed appointments
• Noncompliance with medications
• Inability to explain medication purpose
• Overstating how well they are doing
• Excuses: “I forgot my glasses”
Almost everyone will have difficulty with health literacy at some point.

Much harder for those that do not:
- Read very well.
- Speak English as their primary language.
The triple threat to effective health communication

- Language difference
- Cultural difference
- Low health literacy

You may be thinking.....
Adopt Universal Precautions

Since you can’t always tell by looking….

• Take actions that minimize risk for everyone
• Use plain language with everyone
8 Steps to Better Communication
Create Shame-Free Environment

Even highly educated people prefer simple, understandable health information.
20% of American adults read at or below the 5th grade level.

Most health care materials are written above the 10th grade level.
Use Plain Language

Prevents osteoporosis

Keeps bones strong
### Search results: case management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Translations</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>case management</td>
<td>A service to help patients get the health care they need</td>
<td>en español: administración de casos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Use Short Words & Sentences

• Return in one week.
• Bring your insurance card with you.
• Please sign in.
• Take this form to your boss tomorrow.
• Pay your premium by next Friday.
• Drink plenty of orange juice.
Use one-idea sentences

Sentences with one idea

No: Help may be available for you to pay your medical bills and to find out if you qualify, here’s what you should do.

Yes: We may be able to help you pay your medical bills. Find out if you qualify. Follow these steps.
Use active voice

Passive: You will be asked to give information about your medical history.

Active: We will ask for information about your medical history.

Avoid: It shall be signed
You will be notified

Use: You must sign
We will notify you
**Use concrete language (say what you mean)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise regularly</th>
<th>Exercise 3-5 days per week for 40 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t lift anything heavy</td>
<td>Don’t lift anything over 10 pounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get adequate rest</td>
<td>Get at least 7 hours/night</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Slow down

Speak clearly and at a moderate pace.

sorrymyemaillookslikethisbutmycomputerdroppedandmyspacebarbroke
Organize for understanding

Only “need to know” concepts
Chunking

• Break up material into manageable chunks

• Limit to 5 pieces of information at a time; 3 even better
Before….

Straight Leg Raise

Lying on your back, bend your opposite knee straight and slowly lift your other leg up approximately 12 in, hold for 3s, and lower slowly.
After....

Straight Leg Raise

• Lie on your back
• Bend left leg
• Lift right leg 12 inches
• Hold for 3 seconds
• Lower slowly

Literacy and the Older Adult, from Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation, Oct-Dec2005, Vol. 21 Issue 4, p275
Show or draw pictures

- Fever
- Chills
- Body aches
- Cough
- Sleepy
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Sneeze
Relevant pictures

Which would be best to illustrate a stop smoking message?
Help with numbers

Pop Quiz on Numeracy

1. A person taking Drug A has a 1% chance of having an allergic reaction. If 1,000 people take Drug A, how many would you expect to have an allergic reaction?
   Answer: 10

2. A person taking Drug B has a 1 in 1,000 chance of an allergic reaction. What percent of people taking Drug B will have an allergic reaction?
   Answer: 0.1%
Help with numbers

• Less is more—only relevant information

• Reduce need for calculations

• Pictographs, diagrams, charts

• Frequency, not percent

• Familiar objects as analogies
Verify understanding using “Teach Back”

• Asking people to repeat in their own words what they need to know or do, in a non-shaming way.

• NOT a test of the person, but of how well you explained a concept.

• A chance to check for understanding and, if necessary, re-teach the information.
Using Teach Back…

- Ask to demonstrate understanding

“We have gone over a lot of information today. What will you tell your boss about your health condition?”

“I want to be sure I explained everything clearly. Please tell me how can you avoid losing your health insurance.”

- Do not ask: “Do you understand?”
Teach Back Tips

• Start slowly – once a day?
• Plan and practice your approach
• Use handouts

Once you get used to Teach-Back, it doesn’t take any more time.
Ask the right questions

– Is there something else you want to address in the visit today?

– Is there anything else you want to address in the visit today?

Encouraging questions

• “What questions do you have?”

• “Tell me your questions.”
If you only remember three things:

1. Practice plain language
2. Slow down
3. Teach back-confirm understanding

(3 Best Practices: DeWalt et al, 2010)
What Questions Do You Have?

Steve Sparks
Health Literacy Director
steve@wisconsinliteracy.org