Health Literacy for Patients With Cancer

Awareness and Strategies for Improvement

This program has been provided and paid for by Merck.
Understanding Health Literacy
Understanding the Terminology


Literacy
- Interpret and understand
- Able to use written or printed information
- Able to function in society
- Develop knowledge and potential

Health Literacy
- Integrated reading, listening, and analytical skills
- Ability to make appropriate health care decisions
- Ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information
Health Literacy Factors Affecting Abilities

The Scope and Impact of Health Literacy for Patients
According to the American Medical Association Foundation, health literacy is a stronger predictor of a person’s health status than age, income, education, employment status, or race.¹

• Based on the results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)²:
  
  • Only 12% of adults have Proficientᵃ,ᵇ health literacy.
  
  • 14% of adults have Below Basicᵃ,ᶜ health literacy.
      – They were more likely to report health as being poor (42%).
      – They were more likely to lack health insurance (28%).

ᵃThis reflects the average of 3 NAAL scales: prose, document, and quantitative literacy.
ᵇAdults who are Proficient have skills allowing them to perform more complex and challenging literacy activities.
ᶜAdults who are Below Basic have the most simple and concrete literacy skills.

Low Health Literacy: Who Is Affected?

- Low health literacy can affect people of all ages, races, incomes, and education levels.¹
- Some population groups are particularly vulnerable to health literacy challenges²:
  - The elderly (age 65+)
  - People for whom English is a second language
  - Ethnic minorities
  - Adults with a limited income

Low health literacy is more prevalent among the elderly.¹

- Of adults 60 years of age and older²:
  - 71% had trouble interpreting print materials
  - 80% had difficulty completing forms or charts
  - 68% struggled performing quantitative tasks (i.e., basic math to determine dosage)

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**Adults 65+ have the highest rate of Below Basic³ health literacy¹**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Below Basic Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16–18</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–24</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–39</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>50–64</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³Adults who are Below Basic have the most simple and concrete literacy skills.

Minorities have a low health literacy level.¹

• Hispanic adults have the lowest average health literacy of all minority groups.

• In the US, adults who spoke only English before beginning school have a higher health literacy level than those for whom English is a second language.

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Vulnerable Populations: Adults With a Limited Income

Health literacy is lower among adults who have a limited income, are unemployed, or are insured by Medicaid.¹

- The Below Basic health literacy level is 4 times higher in uninsured adults compared to those with employer-provided insurance.²
- 3% of adults on Medicaid have Proficient health literacy compared to 14% of adults with employer-provided insurance.²

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The Scope and Impact of Health Literacy for Patients With Cancer
Health literacy may be an important predictor of increased cancer risk and can negatively affect a patient's health care decision making.¹

- Patients with low health literacy may have difficulty making informed decisions, as well as accessing and navigating the cancer care system.¹
  - Men reading below a 6th grade level are 69% more likely to be diagnosed with later-stage prostate cancer than those reading above a 6th grade level.
  - 60% of low health-literacy patients with cancer overestimated their chance of cure, compared to the doctor's estimation.

Minorities are more likely to develop cancer, less likely to access high-quality cancer care, and more likely to die from cancer.¹

- The cancer death rate of black men is 33% higher than white men.
- The cancer death rate of black women is 16% higher than white women.
- Hispanic women are twice as likely to develop cervical cancer than white women.
- Black men are 1.7 times more likely to develop prostate cancer compared to white men.²

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Adults with incomes below the poverty line are more likely to have low health literacy and less likely to receive cancer screenings or treatment.\(^1\),\(^2\)

- Women from poor, low, or middle-income households were less likely to receive a mammogram compared to women from high-income households.\(^3\)
- Compared to uninsured patients, Medicaid patients were\(^4\):
  - 6% more likely to have late-stage prostate cancer
  - 31% more likely to have late-stage breast cancer
  - 81% more likely to have late-stage melanoma

Only 43% of oncologists consistently discuss the cost of care with their patients.\(^5\)

Cancer screening may not be as effective in adults with low health literacy as they are not familiar with cancer terms used by their doctors.\(^1\)

- In one study, elderly women believed\(^1\):
  - As they got older, they were less likely to develop cancer
  - The risk of cervical cancer was low following menopause or in the absence of sexual activity

- In a study of low-income, low-literacy black men\(^2\):
  - More than 50% could not locate the prostate on a chart
  - 29% could not locate the bowels on a chart
  - 35% could not locate the bladder on a chart
  - 95% did not understand the word “incontinence”

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Due to its evolving complexity, cancer treatment and screening recommendations may not be fully understood by adults across all literacy levels.\textsuperscript{1,2}

- An adult screened for cancer may lack the basic understanding of test results, and a cancer patient may be unfamiliar with treatment options and clinical trial opportunities.\textsuperscript{1,2}

- 70\% to 80\% of patients with metastatic lung or colorectal cancer on chemotherapy and 64\% of patients with metastatic lung cancer on radiation therapy did not understand that their treatment was unlikely to cure their disease.\textsuperscript{2}

Impact on Patient Safety

Studies show the skills needed to understand and use health-related information often exceed the abilities of the average person.¹

- 65% of adverse events reported were the result of communication breakdowns.

### Commonly Used Medical Terms Often Misunderstood By Patients¹⁻⁴:

- Benign
- Bowel
- Carcinoma
- Cervix
- Colon
- Fatigue
- Grade
- Growth
- Lesion
- Malignancy
- Metastatic
- Noninvasive
- Oral
- Polyp
- Rectum
- Screening
- Stage
- Tumor

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Strategies for Health Care Providers
Some common patient behaviors that could indicate limited health literacy\textsuperscript{1}:

- Not having reading glasses available
- Difficulty completing health forms
- Frequently missed appointments
- Lack of follow-through with laboratory tests or referrals to specialists
- Noncompliance with medication regimens
- Inability to list and describe the purpose of prescribed medications

7 Ways Health Care Professionals Can Improve Cancer Care Communication With Patients

1. Slow down

2. Discuss 3 to 5 key points

3. Use simple language and short sentences

4. Utilize visual illustrations, models, and drawings

5. Summarize next steps and what the patient needs to do

6. Use the Teach-Back Technique to confirm patient’s understanding

7. Be honest, positive, encouraging, and empowering

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Commitment From Merck
“Health literacy is vital to achieving the best possible results from medical care, medicines, and vaccine…. We must partner with patients to promote their understanding of their medical condition or disease, the reasons they are being treated, and the appropriate use of medications and other treatments. This will result in maximizing the benefit and minimizing issues when using our medicines. Merck is committed to improving health literacy as part of our mission to improve health.”

– Michael Rosenblatt, MD, chief medical officer, Merck
