

Improving Your Health Care Literacy

Personal health care literacy refers to your ability to find and understand health care information and services and use those to make informed decisions for yourself. It includes being familiar with health care basics, understanding common medical terms and navigating health care information effectively. Improving your health care literacy can help you avoid unnecessary spending, stay healthy and prevent health problems down the line.

Low health literacy is quite common in the United States. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) reports that merely 12% of Americans have proficient health literacy skills, which means many adults have difficulty understanding drug labels, following prescription instructions or identifying credible health care resources.

This article explains the importance of health care literacy and provides strategies for improving your health care knowledge.

Overview

The NAAL categorizes individuals into four levels of health literacy:

1. **Proficient**—People with proficient health literacy have the least difficulty navigating the health care system because they have the necessary skills to perform complex and challenging literacy tasks. They can understand detailed written materials, synthesize information and make complex inferences. This group is typically effective at following health instructions and adhering to treatment plans.
2. **Intermediate**—Individuals at this level can read and understand moderately complex health care documents, extract relevant information and draw reasonable conclusions. They can interpret graphs and charts and make inferences from information on drug labels and other documents. These individuals can generally navigate the health care environment.
3. **Basic**—Those at the basic level can handle simple, everyday literacy tasks like reading, understanding and using information from short health articles, brochures and medical pamphlets. They also have some understanding of common medical conditions. However, these individuals may struggle with navigating more complex health care concepts and some treatment plans.
4. **Below basic**—Individuals at this level have limited literacy skills; they may be nonliterate or able to locate information in basic documents like hospital forms and medical pamphlets. They can often perform simple math operations like addition and understand a short set of instructions given before a medical exam. However, this level of literacy is significantly lower than what is necessary to navigate the health care environment.

Health Care Literacy Challenges

Barriers that may hinder your ability to understand and use health care information include the following:

- **Numeracy struggles**—Numeracy is the ability to solve problems with numbers and quantitative information. Difficulty with numbers may affect one's ability to compare treatment options, understand dosage instructions or evaluate insurance plans.
- **Reading difficulties**—Individuals with reading challenges may have trouble understanding and processing information from written health care materials. They often have limited vocabulary and familiarity with health-related concepts. Those with visual or cognitive impairments are more likely to have reading challenges.
- **Embarrassment**—Talking about health issues, particularly if they involve sensitive topics like sexual or mental health, can cause discomfort. Embarrassment may prevent people from seeking medical advice or asking about treatment plans. Embarrassment can also affect your willingness to engage in health-related educational opportunities. If you feel self-conscious during discussions about your condition, you may miss out on valuable information that could improve your health literacy.
- **Complicated concepts**—Health care is full of medical jargon and complicated systems. Without a solid foundation in health or science, it can be difficult to fully grasp medical instructions or treatment options.
- **Technology**—Health literacy can be a challenge, especially for older adults and individuals who don't have internet access or may be unfamiliar with digital devices. This can make it difficult to access online resources or manage their health through apps or online portals.

Why Health Literacy Matters

Studies show that low health literacy is linked to various negative health outcomes, such as poorer overall health, limited understanding of chronic disease management and lower adherence to medication. Additionally, people with inadequate health literacy are more likely to:

- Use emergency services
- Have trouble predicting health care costs
- See the wrong provider
- Not follow the directions of a health care provider
- Make poor lifestyle and health decisions
- Not know where to access health services
- Pay more for health care than necessary
- Be readmitted to the hospital within 30 days

Tips for Improving Your Health Care Literacy

Enhancing your health care literacy is possible if you are willing to ask questions, seek out resources and stay engaged. Consider the following tips to help you take charge of your health:

- **Prepare before visiting a health care provider.** List topics or concerns you would like to discuss and take notes during your appointment.
- **Ask questions and clarify any unclear details.** If something is unclear, don't hesitate to ask for further explanation or ask your provider to repeat using simpler language.
- **Request for health care materials.** Your health care provider likely has plenty of instructional materials. Ask for visual aids such as videos, diagrams or brochures to help you better digest information.
- **Bring a friend or loved one to your appointment.** Having someone join you during a visit to your health care provider can help take down notes for you or ask questions you may have missed.
- **Attend health education events.** Look for free educational activities such as lectures, webinars and health fairs. These events often feature interactive learning and advice from health care experts.
- **Be a discerning media consumer.** Be cautious about information from TV, social media or the internet, as it may be incomplete or inaccurate. Always verify what you learn with a health care professional to avoid harming yourself and others.
- **Use technology to manage your health.** Many apps and websites offer easy-to-understand explanations and tools for managing health. Use these digital platforms to learn about symptoms, track medications or book doctor's appointments.
- **Join community programs.** Community health initiatives include workshops and culturally relevant materials for diverse groups. Participating in these programs can help you gain relatable information and expert insight.

Conclusion

Health care literacy is essential for better managing your well-being and preventing your risk of diseases. Check with HR or your manager for health care resources that may be available in your organization.

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