

Health literacy is a patient's ability to **obtain, understand and act on** health information. And the capacity of health care providers and health care systems to **communicate clearly, educate about health and empower patients.**<sup>1</sup>

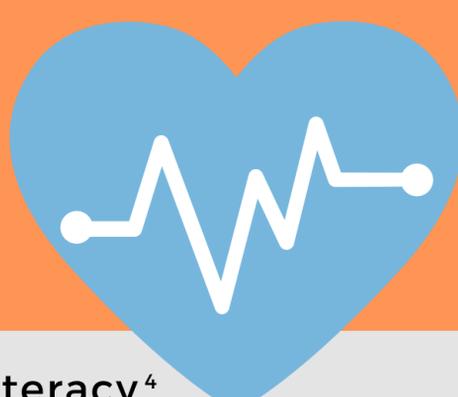
Communication is a two-way street requiring an empowered patient and an empowering provider.

**50%**

Nearly half of all American adults lack health literacy (90 million Americans).<sup>2</sup>

**Patients with low health literacy are more likely to:**<sup>3</sup>

- visit an Emergency Department
- have more hospital stays
- not follow treatment plans
- have higher mortality rates
- have more medicine errors.



## Understanding Health Literacy<sup>4</sup>

Percentage of patients in each category and what that means.

**14%** | **Below Basic Health Literacy**

Patients with below basic health literacy can circle the date of a medical appointment on a hospital appointment slip.

**22%** | **Basic Health Literacy**

Patients with basic health literacy can give two reasons a person should be tested for a specific disease, based on information in a clearly written pamphlet.

**53%** | **Intermediate Health Literacy**

Patients with intermediate health literacy can determine what time a person can take a prescription medicine, based on information on the label that relates the timing of medicine to eating.

**12%** | **Proficient Health Literacy**

Patients with proficient health literacy can calculate an employee's share of health insurance costs for a year, using a table.

**Anyone can struggle with health information at any point.**

The most vulnerable populations are:

### 1 OLDER ADULTS

81% of patients age 60 or older at a public hospital could not read or understand basic materials.<sup>9</sup>

### 2 PEOPLE WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS

Up to 43% of patients have cognitive impairment at the time of discharge.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 IMMIGRANTS & LOW INCOME ADULTS

The cost of low health literacy increases U.S. health care costs by \$106 to \$236 billion a year.<sup>6</sup>



**77 Million**

adults have basic or below basic literacy skills.<sup>7</sup>



**9 out of 10**

adults struggle to understand and use health information when it is: unfamiliar, complex, jargon-filled!<sup>8</sup>



## Best Practice for Improvement<sup>8</sup>

1. Use plain language:

- Speak in living room language.
  - Health education is often communicated at the 12th grade reading level. The average American reads at an 8th grade level.<sup>9</sup>
- State information clearly and simply.

2. Use teach back or ask patients to say it back in their own words.

3. Ask questions to check for understanding.

4. Simplify numbers. Do not ask a patient to do the math.

5. Use shared decision making to talk about decisions together.

**Say:** You have cancer. We need to know where it has spread. A CAT scan should tell us. Then we will know if medicine can stop it.



**Do not say:** To stage your malignancy, we need to perform diagnostic scans. Then, once we know the etiology, we can discuss some of the various treatment options.



Go to [healthliteracymn.org](http://healthliteracymn.org) to learn more about health literacy.

Resources:

1. Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership

2. 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey of 19,000 English-speaking adults in the U.S.

3. [www.cdc.gov/php](http://www.cdc.gov/php)

4. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute for Education Sciences.

5. Institute of Medicine, Implications of Health Literacy for Discharge Instructions: A Workshop, March 2014.

6. 2007 study by the University of Connecticut.

7. 2004, The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine.

8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016.

9. September 2005, Mayo Clinic Proceedings 80(8):991-4.