



## Health Literacy Awareness

### What is Health Literacy?

Health literacy is “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (Selden, Zorn, Ratzan, & Parker, 2000). The National Assessment of Adult Literacy revealed that the percentage of adults with proficient health literacy is only 12% (National Assessment of Adult Literacy as cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.).

There is no discrete profile of a person who lacks basic health literacy. Hearing the spoken vocabulary of individuals is not an indicator.

### Who Lacks Health Literacy?

There is no discrete profile of a person who lacks basic health literacy. Hearing the spoken vocabulary of individuals is not an indicator. Those who lack health literacy are not able to:

- Determine what time a person can take a prescription medication, based on information on the prescription drug label that relates the timing of medication to eating.
- Identify three substances that may interact with an over-the-counter drug to cause side effects, using information on the over-the-counter drug label.
- Give two reasons why a person with no symptoms of a specific disease should be tested for the disease, based on information on a clearly written pamphlet. (Weiss, 2007, p.9).

Some, but not all people who lack health literacy also lack basic literacy skills. Those who lack literacy skills may be found amongst the elderly, individuals who earn a low income, are unemployed, or did not finish high school, minorities, and those who do not speak English or speak English as a second language (Lambert, 2009).

### Strategies for Improving Health Literacy

- Raise awareness. Share the facts about the lack of health literacy in the United States. Take action. Work with local health care providers, hospitals and other health centers to improve the usability of health information and health services.
- Partner with local educators. Suggest the addition or enhancement of health education in the curriculum of school-aged children, adults learning English as a second language, and that of other learning environments.

## Current Information About Health Literacy

### AMA Health Literacy News

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/about-ama/ama-foundation/our-programs/public-health/health-literacy-program/health-literacy-news.shtml>

Health literacy in the news as compiled by the American Medical Association (AMA).

### Health Literacy Out Loud

<http://www.healthliteracyoutloud.com/>

This site contains podcasts during which guest speakers talk about innovative work they are doing to promote health communication. The interviewer is Helen Osborne, Health Literacy Consultant and founder of Health Literacy Month. Download or listen online.

### Herschel S. Horowitz Center for Health Literacy at the University of Maryland's School of Public Health

<http://sph.umd.edu/literacy/index.cfm>

This center is the nation's first academic based health literacy center. It hosts a speaker series and a brown bag series. The site provides links to additional resources.

### Listserv of the Roundtable on Health Literacy of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies

[http://www8.nationalacademies.org/mail\\_list/default.asp?list\\_id=856&action=subscribe](http://www8.nationalacademies.org/mail_list/default.asp?list_id=856&action=subscribe)

This group has a focus on health literacy research. Read about the Roundtable's reports and other activities at <http://www.iom.edu/Activities/PublicHealth/HealthLiteracy.aspx>

## Reference List

Lambert, K.C. (2009). *Caring for Patients with Limited Health Literacy* [Video]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDWxaod0KPs>

Selden, C., Zorn, M., Ratzan, S. & Parker, R.M. (2000). *Health literacy: Current bibliographies in medicine; no. 2000-1, 479 citations from January 1990 through October 1999*. Retrieved from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/archive//20061214/pubs/cbm/hliteracy.html>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (n.d.). *Quick guide to health literacy*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/advocate.htm>

Weiss, B.D. (2007). *Health literacy and patient safety: Help patients understand: manual for clinicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Retrieved from <http://www.ama-ssn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/367/healthlitclinicians.pdf>