



## **Tip Sheet #2: Effective Health Communication – Health Literacy**

The new Conditions for Coverage state “the patient has the right to receive all information in a way that he or she can understand” §494.70(a)(2). Effective health communication involves awareness of your patients’ level of health literacy, culture, and language skills. Tip Sheet #3 will address cultural issues and limited English proficiency.

***Effective health communication contributes to***

- ✓ ***Positive health outcomes,***
- ✓ ***Patients following provider instructions,***
- ✓ ***Lower rates of anxiety, pain and psychological distress in patients, and***
- ✓ ***Increased trust between patients and providers.***

Have you noticed how you can give three different patients the same instructions and get back three different levels of compliance? Have you ever asked yourself why doesn’t the patient “get it”...that taking medications or coming to treatment is important? Do you get frustrated that you talk until you are blue in the face and the patient still doesn’t follow directions? One reason may be the patient’s level of health literacy.

Health literacy impacts the effectiveness of health communication and is defined in the government report *Healthy People 2010*([www.healthypeople.gov](http://www.healthypeople.gov)) as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand the basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.” It is not simply the ability to read. Consider the multiple and complicated treatment issues associated with dialysis, and health literacy takes on even more importance.

### **Did you know...**

- ❑ Nearly 9 out of 10 adults may lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease.
- ❑ Patients may try to hide their lack of understanding of health information due to fear of being misunderstood or disrespected.
- ❑ Enhancing health literacy does not always require additional resources. It is a method for improving the effectiveness of the work you are already doing.

### **Some behaviors to watch for that may indicate low health literacy include:**

- ❑ Seeking help only when illness is advanced
- ❑ Making excuses for not reading materials in front of the provider (“I forgot my glasses”)
- ❑ Being quiet or passive
- ❑ Frequently skipping appointments
- ❑ Being non-compliant with medications

- ❑ Being unable to name their medications or explain their medications' purpose
- ❑ Having difficulty explaining their medical concerns
- ❑ Having no questions at all

### Tools/Interventions

- ❑ Education materials and teaching messages should reflect the literacy skills of your patients.
- ❑ Teach-Back/Show Me Method – the patient shows you s/he understands what you are teaching by restating the message *in his/her own words* (not repeating your words). Repeat until you are confident of patient's comprehension. Break down complicated instructions into smaller teaching points. This method will ensure the message is understood and remembered.
- ❑ Minimize the use of medical jargon and mirror patient's dialogue. The *Words to Watch Fact Sheet* provides some examples and is included with this tip sheet.
- ❑ Supplement instructions with pictures. A study by Peter Houts showed that the average recall without pictures was 15% and recall with pictures and words was 85%.
- ❑ Instead of asking "do you understand?" ask open-ended questions to create a learning environment.
- ❑ Speak clearly and listen carefully.

### References

1. Unified Health Communication: Addressing Health Literacy, Cultural Competency, and Limited English Proficiency. Health Resources and Services Administration. US Department of Health and Human Services. Web-based training program accessed through [www.train.org](http://www.train.org).
2. Health Literacy, Consumer Health Manual. National Network of Libraries of Medicine. [nmlm.gov/outreach/consumer/hlthlit.html](http://nmlm.gov/outreach/consumer/hlthlit.html).
3. "Health Literacy and Chronic Illness Management" Conference Summary. May 2007. Dean Schillinger, MD; Michael K. Paasche-Orlow, MD; Leonard and Cecilia Doak; Jeanne McGee, PhD; Lorraine S. Wallace, PhD. [www.ih4health.org](http://www.ih4health.org).
4. Quick Guide to Health Literacy. US Department of Health and Human Services. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

**WORDS TO WATCH – FACT SHEET**

<b>PROBLEM WORD</b>	<b>CONSIDER USING</b>
Active Role	Taking part in
Avoid	Stay away from; do not use (or eat)
Collaborate	Work together
Factor	Other thing
Gauge	Measure; get a better idea of; test
Intake	What you eat or drink; what goes into your body
Option	Choice
Referral	Ask you to see another doctor
Wellness	Good health; feeling good
Adequate	Enough
Adjust	Fine-tune; change
Excessive	Too much
Increase gradually	Add to
Moderately	Not too much
Inhibitor	Drug that stops something that is bad for you
Condition	How you feel; health problem
Procedure	Something done to treat your problem; operation
Routinely	Often
Significantly	Enough to make a difference
Temporary	For a limited time

(Adapted from the *Ask Me 3* educational program provided by the *Partnership for Clear Health Communication* at [www.AskMe3.org](http://www.AskMe3.org).)

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