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The Oklahoma Literacy Resource Office

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Literacy Fact Sheet: Health Literacy

A 45-year-old Hispanic immigrant undergoes a job-related health screening and is told that his blood pressure is very high. He goes to the local public hospital and is given a prescription for a beta-blocker and diuretic, each to be taken once a day. One week later, he goes to the hospital after experiencing dizziness. His blood pressure is very low, and he says he has been taking the medicine just like it says on the bottle. The case is discussed by multiple practitioners until one who speaks Spanish asks the patient how many pills he took each day. "Twenty-two," he replies. The provider explains to his colleagues that "once" means "11" in Spanish.—*Help Patients Understand*, American Medical Association

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[Correctional Education Family Literacy and Learning Disabilities Workforce Literacy](#)

Defining 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.—Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, Title V
- Health literacy includes reading and writing skills necessary to understand health and medication information. It is also an individual's ability to complete complex forms, locate available health providers and services, share health history, and negotiate signage at health care facilities.
- Health literacy includes numeracy skills for such things as understanding cholesterol and blood sugar levels, measuring medications, and understanding nutrition labels.
- Health literacy includes effective communication between health care professionals and patients with low literacy skills and/or individuals with limited English.

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Why is Health Literacy important?

- Nearly 9 out of 10 adults have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely available in our healthcare facilities, retail outlets, media and communities.—[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- Current data indicates that more than a third of American adults—some 89 million people—lack sufficient health literacy to effectively undertake and execute needed medical treatments and preventative health care.—[AMA Foundation](#)
- Without clear understanding of health literacy information, individuals are more likely to skip necessary medical tests, forgo preventative health measures, and have higher rates of hospitalization and emergency services.—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Persons with limited literacy skills are more likely to have chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or asthma, and are less likely to manage them effectively.—U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Poor health literacy is a stronger predictor of a person's health than his age, socioeconomic status, education, or ethnicity.—AMA Foundation
- Forty-six percent of American adults cannot read and follow medical instructions.—AMA Foundation
- In a 2004 survey of 706 Iowa physicians, 45 percent reported having "experienced, witnessed or heard about errors in patient care that were a result of patient difficulties with reading and writing skills or understanding/communicating with medical personnel." Of the physicians reporting errors, 31 percent reported some physical pain, harm or damage, and 18 percent reported some emotional pain, harm or damage, resulted from these errors. Despite recognizing that communication-related errors occur and have significant effects, 43 percent reported they "tend to think patients understood the information given to them if the patients do not ask questions during a visit.—AMA Foundation

- One study revealed the following problems experienced by persons with limited health literacy when they interacted with the health care system (AMA Foundation):
 - 26% did not understand when their next appointment was scheduled
 - 42% did not understand instructions to “take medication on an empty stomach”
 - 78% misinterpret warnings on prescription labels
 - 86% could not understand rights and responsibilities section of a Medicaid application.
- Every day, millions of adults must make decisions and take actions on issues that protect not only their own well-being, but also that of their family members and communities. These actions are not confined to traditional health-care settings such as doctors and dentists’ offices, hospitals, and clinics. They take place in homes, at work, in schools, and in community forums across the country. Health-related activities are part of the daily life of adults, whether they are sick or well.—AMA Foundation
- Over 300 studies have shown that health information cannot be understood by most of the people for whom it was intended, suggesting that the assumptions regarding the recipient’s level of health literacy made by the creators of this information are often incorrect.—AMA Foundation
- The combination of medical errors, excess hospitalizations, longer hospital stays, more use of emergency departments, and a generally higher level of illness—all attributed to limited health literacy—is estimated to result in excess costs for the US health care system of between \$50 billion and \$73 billion per year.—[Center for Health Care Strategies](#)

Recommended Resources

[YouTube video](#) (23 minutes)—American Medical Association Foundation

[*Health Literacy and Patient Safety: Help Patients Understand, Second Edition*](#)—American Medical Association Foundation

[*Quick Guide to Health Literacy*](#)—U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

[health.gov](#)

[*The Health of America's Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy*](#)—National Center for Education Statistics

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