

Increasing Health Literacy to Improve Health Outcomes

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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.

Studies have shown that people with limited health literacy skills are more likely to have chronic conditions, have less knowledge of their illness and are less able to manage their illness effectively.

Research indicates that people who have low health literacy skills:

- Make more medication and treatment errors
- Are less compliant with treatment plans
- Are at a 50% increased risk of hospitalization
- Lack skills necessary to understand the health care system

There is often a major difference between the health information people receive and what they understand. Experts recommend the following ways to increase your patient's health literacy:

- Simplify communication – use layman's terms and simple, clear language.
- Ask open-ended questions versus closed ended questions where patients can just answer yes or no.
- Confirm comprehension – ask your patients to repeat back their understanding of what they heard and what they are going to do instead of asking, "Do you understand?"

Taking steps to ensure your patients leave their visit with a good understanding of their health condition and their care plan will improve health outcomes for your patients.