

Guidelines for teaching patients with low health literacy

When teaching patients with low health literacy, remember:

- Literacy and intelligence are not necessarily correlated. Patients with low literacy skills may be highly intelligent, and simply need to be taught in ways supported by their strengths.
- Our culture values literacy, so people often do not want to admit to low or no literacy skills, and may go to some lengths to keep this information hidden. It is very important that the healthcare professional remain non-confrontational, non-judgmental and supportive when making any assessment of the patient's literacy abilities.
- Make no assumptions about literacy level based on the patient's appearance, race, age, financial status, religion, culture or place of origin. Assess carefully.
- Reading level assessment of text (and there are many indices) is based largely on these characteristics:
 - Average number of words per sentence
 - Average number of syllables per word
 - Difficulty of vocabulary
- Most commercially available patient education materials (including many on the internet) are written at a 9th -10th grade level or higher. Many patients may not be able to read and comprehend these materials.
- Healthcare professionals regularly underestimate the reading level of materials they may be considering for use. It is possible to check reading level fairly simply by using the editing and proofing tools in either Microsoft "Word" or Corel "Word Perfect". To set this function up in "Word", choose 'Options' from the 'Tools' menu, then select 'Grammar', and following the grammar check, you will be offered 'Show Readability Statistics' if this has been set up to appear. Three reading level indices are shown. The most commonly used is the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level index. A Flesch Reading Ease score is also provided.
- It is far too easy for healthcare professionals to underestimate the impact of low health literacy. Literacy has been defined as "more than just the ability to read. It encompasses comprehension, problem-solving skills, synthesis and analysis of information, abstract thinking and reasoning, the capacity to recognize patterns and

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the ability to generalize from them, and the development of a broad general knowledge base”. Patients with low literacy skills may not be willing to express lack of understanding; may not have the vocabulary to ask pertinent questions; and may not use explicit adjectives in describing symptoms and development of their health concerns. Unexpected problems can arise, based on assumptions the healthcare professional may make about the patient’s basic knowledge concerning anatomy, physiology, basic health and hygiene, and skills such as telling time, calculating simple measures, using a telephone or pager, understanding numbers, etc.

- Assessment of literacy skills should be low-key and gentle:
 - Look – Does the patient read? What is being read?
 - Listen – Does the patient ask questions indicating material has been read understood?
 - Get to know the patient – Ask what the patient enjoys doing for relaxation?
 - Is reading mentioned?
 - Does the patient regularly need help with items that need to be read, such as menus, brochures, labels, directions, etc.?

- When teaching patients with low literacy skills:
 - Teach in small increments of time (a few minutes to no more than 30 minutes).
 - Present one idea or topic at a time.
 - Teach essential information first.
 - Teach at a time when the patient is interested - the ‘golden moment’.
 - Repeat key information.
 - Be consistent in the terms used (use ‘operation’ or ‘surgery’, not both).
 - Use short, simple words, avoiding medical jargon and slang terms.
 - Use short, simple sentences.
 - Use easily understood analogies.
 - Evaluate learning often (have the patient restate and/or demonstrate).

- When choosing or writing materials for patients with low literacy skills, the following characteristics (very succinctly) facilitate reading and comprehension:
 - Large print.
 - Simple serif font.
 - Clear headings and sub-headings.
 - Lots of white space.
 - Pertinent, simple line-drawings (these serve as landmarks and reminders).

For detailed guidelines, see the resource titled “Choosing or writing teaching materials for patients with low health literacy”.