

News column for use week of August 15, 2022
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Improving Your Understanding of Your Medical Situation

Health literacy means your ability to collect and understand your health information so you can make the best decisions for your unique situation. This includes understanding basic health information such as following instructions from a healthcare provider, managing a chronic illness, or taking medication properly.

Only 12% of adults in the United States have good health literacy, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This means that 88% of adults may lack the skills to manage their health and reduce their risk of disease.

Health literacy can be a barrier to accessing healthcare and make residents reluctant to seek healthcare due to frustration from communicating with healthcare professionals. Additionally, navigating the healthcare system can be difficult without health literacy skills. Limited health literacy is associated with a lower likelihood of using preventive health services, a greater likelihood of taking medicines incorrectly, and poor health status.

At its most basic level, health literacy involves your ability to understand information about your body and your health. The information usually comes from a doctor or other healthcare provider and may be presented in a number of ways, including spoken, written, as a picture, graphic, or other visual image, as a video or slide show, or online.

While it's important for healthcare professionals to speak in plain language, acknowledge cultural differences, and ensure that patients understand health information, there are also steps you can take to improve your health literacy.

Ask questions. If you don't understand what your doctor is telling you, ask questions. Studies show that many patients are embarrassed to ask questions when they're confused. Explain to your doctor that you're having trouble understanding.

Repeat what your doctor tells you in your own words. Your doctor may give you a lot of information in a short time. Start by saying, "Let me make sure I understand. You said..." This gives your doctor a chance to clear up anything you've misheard or don't understand.

Bring a friend or loved one with you to your appointment. If they can't come to the appointment in person, ask if they can join you by phone. Have them take notes for you, just in case you miss something.

Keep a running list of questions for your doctor. The list can include terms you don't understand, questions about research you've seen, or side effects that concern you.

Ask for a translator or bring one with you. If your first language is different than the one spoken where you live, you may not understand complex medical terms or instructions. Ask your doctor's office if translation services are available. If they aren't, bring someone to translate for you.

Ask if there are other materials that can help you understand. Your doctor's office is likely to have additional materials to help explain complicated information. Not everyone learns best by listening to someone talk. Some people learn best by looking at pictures, reading the information, or by watching a video.

Be careful about what you read on the internet. There are thousands of medical websites. Sadly, not all of them are reviewed by experts, and some exist only to spread bad information and sell items.

When you search for medical information online, ensure the website is operated by a reputable organization, such as the National Institutes of Health, the American Cancer Society, the American Society of Clinical Oncology, or other independent groups. It's also good to look at several different websites to ensure the information is confirmed by multiple organizations.

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