

Improving Oral Communication to Promote Health Literacy

Health information that is delivered in a clear, engaging, and personally relevant manner can promote understanding, action, and self-empowerment, no matter the literacy level of the recipient.

Oral communication, particularly between providers and patients in a medical setting, is a critical medium through which vital information is shared and decisions are made. The following strategies should be used to promote health literacy:

- **Create a safe and respectful environment.** Greet patients warmly. Make eye contact. Take the time to get to know the patient and earn his or her trust.
- **Use speech that is easy to understand.** Slow down your speaking pace. Limit content to a few key points. Be specific and concrete, not general. Use words that are simple and familiar. Avoid complex technical jargon or acronyms (see *Simplified Language* examples in the box below).
- **Keep the individual engaged in the conversation.** Use pictures, physical models, videos, or interactive media to aid technically complex conversations. Ask open-ended questions to facilitate discussion. Get to know what the patient cares about most – family, friends, work, hobbies – and incorporate those into your health discussions.
- **Confirm patient understanding.** Ask the individual to “teach back” the information you have imparted. Remind the individual that many people have difficulty understanding the materials. Summarize key points.

HEALTH LITERACY SNAPSHOT

An older Asian-American man cannot understand the dosage label on his medication. For fear of taking the wrong dosage, he does not take it at all. His back pain gets worse and he is not able to go into work for a whole week. He recalls being rushed through his appointment and unable to understand the doctor's accent. He left without being able to ask any other staff for help as they seemed too busy.

Simplified Language Swap-Outs

Common Term	Modification
Eligible	→ Qualified, or able to get
Hormone	→ Natural or manmade chemical that can impact your energy, mood, and/or growth
Hypertension	→ High blood pressure
Infection	→ Problem caused by germs; reason you clean open wounds
Pulmonary	→ Related to breathing
Supplement	→ Add to, in addition to

For more, see: <http://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11500/>

This is one in a series of health literacy fact sheets that address topics like identifying low health literacy, improving print communications, and the role of culture in health literacy, produced with support from Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit. For more information, visit www.chcs.org.

Preparation for Health Care Encounters

To improve the quality and content of in-person encounters, providers, care managers, health plan administrators, and other professionals can ask patients to prepare for their medical visits by:

- Making a list of two or three questions they want answered;
- Bringing in a list of all medications (prescription, over-the-counter, vitamins/herbal) or the actual bottles;
- Bringing copies of recent test results or reports from other health care providers, including any personal health records;
- Asking a family member or friend to accompany them to help write down information or remember what was said; and/or
- Reporting all symptoms and anything that does not seem quite right during their office visit, and asking the provider to repeat instructions at the end of the visit.

Supports in the Medical Office Environment

Beyond the interactions with health care professionals, other aspects of the medical office environment – unreadable signage, complicated layouts, or chaotic environments – can impact patient experiences. Individuals with lower health literacy may feel intimidated in professional health care environments. This may lead them to avoid seeking out services, asking clarifying questions, challenging a provider’s assumptions, or sharing vital personal details during medical appointments.

Health care institutions can pay attention to the following to help ensure that individuals with low health literacy will successfully participate in health care services:

- The facility’s name is clearly displayed outside the building and entry signs are visible.
- The signs use plain, everyday words such as “Walk-in,” in addition to “Ambulatory Care.”
- Maps, including handheld ones, are available to navigate the premises.
- Overhead signs use large lettering and are in languages of major population groups.
- Color codes or symbols are used consistently on walls and floors to mark paths.
- All staff wear a form of identification such as a uniform, nametag, or button.
- There is a welcome or information desk with friendly personnel.
- Multilingual and racially/ethnically diverse providers and administrative staff are available.

MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING: Helping Providers and Patients Reach Goals Together

Motivational interviewing is a patient-centered method of engagement and ongoing communication that is based on meeting patients in a comfortable, familiar environment; addressing goals defined by the patient; and gradually helping patients work toward more ambitious goals. It is a promising technique that is increasingly used by providers to support patients with complex chronic conditions and significant social barriers. Providers looking to better address the needs of individuals with low health literacy can use this model, or incorporate its elements into care delivery. For more information: www.motivationalinterview.org.