



## WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?

Over the years, medical care has become increasingly complex. Patients are being asked to undertake more and more complicated self-care regimens while nearly half of all American adults – some 90 million people – may lack the sufficient health literacy to effectively execute medical treatments.

According to Healthy People 2010, “health literacy” is defined as: “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”

Being health literate includes being able to understand a health care professional’s directions, plans for treatment and prescription bottle instructions. Health literacy is not simply the ability to read, but also to listen, analyze, and make decisions. Patients must be able to apply these skills in actual health settings including a doctor’s office, hospital or emergency room.

- **THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LOW HEALTH LITERACY, POOR HEALTH AND COST**

According to the American Medical Association, poor health literacy is a stronger predictor of a person’s health than age, income, employment status, educational level and race. Independent studies among patients with asthma and diabetes showed that poor health literacy skills were strongly correlated with improper use of a metered-dose inhaler and poor glycemic control.

In addition to the effects of low health literacy on individual patients, the economic impact can be significant. Low health literacy has been found to be linked to higher rates of hospitalization.

- **THE PREVALENCE OF LOW HEALTH LITERACY**

Nearly half of all American adults may lack adequate health literacy skills. Populations most likely to have low health literacy are older adults, certain racial and ethnic minorities, people with less education, people with low income levels, and non-native English speaking adults. However, it is important to acknowledge that health information can be challenging at times for everyone to understand, regardless of health literacy level.

## • CREATING A PATIENT-CENTRIC MEDICAL OFFICE

Following are tips from the American Medical Association (AMA) Foundation to help health care professionals create a more patient-centric medical office.

- Have a person (not a computer-generated system) assigned to answer the phone as often as possible
  - Offer directions to the office
  - Help patients prepare for the visit by reminding them to make a list of questions and bring their medications with them
- Use clear and easy-to-follow signage in the office
  - Ask staff to welcome patients with a general attitude of helpfulness
  - During the office check-in:
    - Provide assistance with completing forms
    - Develop forms in multiple languages
    - Provide forms in an easy-to-read format
- When referring patients for tests, procedures, consultations:
  - Review the instructions together
  - Provide directions to the site of referral
  - Provide assistance with insurance issues
- When providing patients with information:
  - Routinely review important information
  - Provide handouts in easy-to-read formats
  - Use illustrations to help describe a specific medical condition or treatment

For additional information on how to create a patient-centric medical office and “easy to read” materials, please visit the AMA Foundation web site or one of the following resources:

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration  
<http://www.hrsa.gov/>
- National Institutes of Health <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>
- American Medical Association <http://www.ama-assn.org/>

We hope that Time to Talk CARDIO helps you build a strong partnership with your health care professional. We have a large library of videos to help you communicate effectively about your heart health with your health care team. Please visit our Web site at [www.timetotalkcardio.com](http://www.timetotalkcardio.com).

We look forward to your return visit!

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