



HEALTH LITERACY LEVELS

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The majority of patients of all races function with health literacy below a proficient level.¹ People must be able to understand health care information to make informed choices. Health care providers can create that bridge.

Multiple information sources influence patients' health care choices and behaviors.² Understanding the sea of health information available from health care providers, the news media, family and friends, and websites can require complex sorting of written prose, verbal instructions, graphs, and numbers. Only 14% of whites and 7% of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) scored at the proficient health literacy levels needed for this kind of literacy activity, according to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey of U.S. adults aged 16 years and older.¹ The combined percentage of "basic" and "below basic" health literacy levels for AI/ANs was 48%.¹

What You Can Do

Health care providers, educators, navigators, and people who develop materials for patients can help break down health literacy barriers. These resources provide practical tips:

- The [American Medical Association website](#) offers videos for providers with useful techniques to improve patients' understanding without increasing shame.
- The [CDC's Clear Communication Index](#) will help you assess your print materials and find ways to make information easier to comprehend. A [Plain Language Thesaurus](#) lists clearer alternatives to medical terms.
- The [Effective Communication Tools for Health Care Professionals](#) is a free, online, self-paced training to improve provider-patient communication that accounts for cultural diversity and low health literacy.

Examples of activities at each literacy level:¹

- **Below basic** – Understand instructions about what to drink before a medical test
- **Basic** – List reasons to be tested for a disease based on a pamphlet
- **Intermediate** – Determine your body mass index (BMI) by looking at a height and weight graph
- **Proficient** – Calculate your health insurance costs based on a table of monthly fees by income and family size

Use these resources to improve clear communication with patients and overcome health literacy obstacles.

References

1. Kutner, M, Greenberg, E, Jin, Y, and Paulsen, C. (2006). *The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006-483)*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
2. Pew Research Center. Health Fact Sheet. Accessed August 10, 2015 <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheet/>