

***Improving Health in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties***

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**Health Department: Health Literacy breaks down barriers to health care**

Local health officials are promoting health literacy as a way to improve everyone's access to health care. According to Michele Bever, health director for South Heartland District Health Department (SHDHD), "a person who is health literate is able to obtain, process and understand basic health information."

"Health Literacy is important for all of us as we utilize the health system and try to make the best decisions for our health," she said. "Reducing barriers to health care is one of the priorities identified by residents as part of our four-county community health assessment last year."

"Although the primary responsibility for improving health literacy lies with health professionals and the healthcare systems, there are things that each of us can do as users of health services," said Jean Korth, chronic disease program assistant at SHDHD.

First, get prepared before your next clinic visit. Bring your necessary insurance cards, a list of your medications, your calendar for scheduling future appointments or tests, any self-monitoring logs, past history of health problems, family history and, most important, a list of questions for the doctor.

Jessica Sutton, RN, BSN, and clinic manager for Mary Lanning's Hastings Family Care Clinic, encourages patients to "make sure to include symptoms in your written list of information to bring to your appointment."

Second, during your visit tell your doctor when the problem started and what your symptoms are. "Ask questions as they come up, that way you don't forget them by the end of the visit," says Sutton. "When it comes to your health, there truly is no such thing as a dumb question."

According to Korth, another way to make sure that you understand health information is to repeat it back using phrases such as, "So here's how I understood you..." or "You just told me a lot. Let me be sure I got it all..."

Finally, take notes on what the doctor says or bring someone with you to help listen. Studies show that 40-80% of the medical information patients hear during office visits is forgotten immediately and nearly half of the information retained is incorrect.

After your visit, it is important that you follow your doctor's orders. "If you don't understand, have difficulty following instructions, or have any questions, call your doctor," said Korth. "Don't wait until your next visit and always call your doctor if your symptoms get worse."

According to the health department, health literacy affects health care for people of all ages. Higher health literacy means better quality of care and higher chance for successful health outcomes. "The next time you visit your doctor, be prepared and don't be afraid to ask questions," said Korth. "Remember - you have a right to understand," she said.

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