

Health Literacy – Breaking Down Barriers

Have you ever walked out of a doctor's visit wondering what you heard, wishing you had asked more questions or remembering something you wanted to share? You are not alone.

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to get, understand, and use basic health information and services needed to make proper health decisions and nearly nine out of ten adults lack the needed skills. Health literacy includes the ability to listen, follow directions, fill out forms, calculate using basic math and interact with health professionals

The lack of health literacy skills may be the result of many things acting together at any given moment. These can include age, schooling, general literacy, culture, language, personal history, state of mind, illness, medication side effects, eyesight, stress and/or degree of trust.

All people have the right to health information to help them make informed decisions. The primary responsibility for improving health literacy lies with health professionals and the healthcare systems, but there are a few things you can do, too.

Before Your Visit

First, be prepared for your visit. Make sure you bring your insurance card, some form of identification, a list of your medications. Don't forget vitamins, and non-prescription medications such as aspirin and antacids. According to Deena Burbach, Manager of Mary Lanning Healthcare's Community Health Center, if this is your first visit to a new clinic, it is also helpful to have your medical records sent ahead.

If you are worried that you will miss something, bring a listener or helper. Burbach also suggests bringing logs from any self-monitoring, such as blood pressure or blood sugar, as well as a written list of questions or concerns. In addition, Jessica Sutton, RN, BSN, Clinic Manager for Mary Lanning Healthcare's Hastings Family Care Clinic, encourages including symptoms in your written list.

You may be asked to fill out forms so bring with you information on past health problems such as surgeries, sickness and family health history.

Finally, make sure the doctor's office knows in advance if you will need an interpreter.

During Your Visit

Tell your doctor your main health problem, when the problem started, and what the symptoms are. "Ask questions as they come up, that way they 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. Also, ask your doctor to show you a drawing or a chart, if it would help make things easier to understand.

Another way to make sure that you understand the 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..."

If you are getting a medication, make sure you know how and when to take it. Labels on medicines can sometimes be confusing. Take notes on what the doctor says. 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.

Before you leave your visit, find out what you need to do next. Is there a brochure you can take with you, or can the doctor write out your instructions? Again, it never hurts to ask.

After Your Visit

It is important that you follow your doctor's orders. Your clinic may provide an "after visit summary" or place findings from your visit on your patient portal. Take time to review it. If you do not understand, have difficulty following instructions, or have any questions, call your doctor. Don't wait until your next visit. And always call your doctor if your symptoms get worse.

Make sure you talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you stop taking any prescribed medications. "Pharmacists also are a great source of information," says Burbach.

Health literacy affects health care for people of all ages. The greater your ability to obtain, process and understand health information, the higher your quality of care and a greater chance for successful outcomes. So, the next time you visit your doctor, be prepared and don't be afraid to ask questions. Remember - you have a right to understand!!!

Note: This article is written to an 8th grade reading level. One in every five adults reads at or below a fifth grade level and most health-care materials are written at a 10th grade level. The term "doctor" is used to refer to the person who manages your health care.

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