

*Time to Talk...*



# *What is Health Literacy?*

[www.healthliteracy.ie](http://www.healthliteracy.ie)



## What is health literacy?

Health literacy involves a person being able to understand basic health information whether they receive it in writing, in person or over the phone. It also involves a person having the knowledge to understand their treatment options and make more informed decisions about their own health.

Being health literate includes being able to understand a healthcare professional's directions, plans for treatment and how to take your medications correctly. Health literacy is not simply the ability to read, but also to listen, analyse, and make decisions. Patients must be able to apply these skills in actual health settings including a surgery, clinic, hospital or accident and emergency room.



Over the years, medical care has become increasingly complex. Patients are being asked to undertake more and more complicated self-care regimens.

According to the International Adult Literacy Survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1997, over 50% of the Irish population is affected in some way by literacy difficulties such as problems with reading, writing and numbers. They may lack sufficient health literacy to be able to understand health information provided to them and to take their medication correctly.

### 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 or race. Independent studies among patients with asthma and diabetes showed that poor health literacy skills were strongly linked with improper use of a metered-dose inhaler and poor glycaemia control. In addition to the affects 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 hospitalisation and lower levels of medication compliance.

### The prevalence of low health literacy

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 and medical advice can be challenging at times for everyone to understand, regardless of their literacy level or background.

## Creating a patient-centric surgery or clinic

The following are tips to help healthcare professionals create a more patient-centric surgery or clinic.

- **Help patients prepare for their visit by reminding them to make a list of questions and to bring their medications with them**
  - Offer directions to the surgery or clinic.
- **Use clear and easy-to-follow signage in the surgery or clinic and ask staff to welcome patients. During patient check-in:**
  - provide assistance with completing forms;
  - provide forms in an easy-to-read format; and
  - develop forms in multiple languages if possible.
- **When referring patients for tests, procedures, consultations:**
  - review the instructions together;
  - explain clearly the purpose of the test and ensure the patients understands;
  - provide directions to the site of referral;
  - provide assistance with health insurance queries.
- **When providing patients with information:**
  - routinely review important information;
  - provide handouts in easy-to-read formats; and
  - use illustrations to help describe a specific medical condition or treatment.

**For additional information on how to create a patient-centric medical surgery or clinic and easy-to-read materials, please visit [www.healthliteracy.ie](http://www.healthliteracy.ie) or the website of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) at [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)**

**We hope that 'Time to Talk...health literacy' helps you to build a strong partnership with your patients. Please visit our web site at [www.healthliteracy.ie](http://www.healthliteracy.ie) to learn more about health literacy and for more useful tools that will help you improve your relationship with your patients.**



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