



Partnership for
Clear Health Communication™

Low Health Literacy Affects More Adult Americans Than Obesity, Diabetes, HIV/AIDS and Breast Cancer Combined

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) survey shows that 2 out of every 5 adult Americans have difficulty obtaining, processing, and understanding the basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.¹

This problem affects more adult Americans than those with diabetes, obesity, HIV/AIDS and breast cancer combined.

Low Health Literacy-An Important Public Health Problem that More People Need to Know About¹

- Nearly 90 million Americans-39% of adults in the U.S.-are limited in their ability to read and understand health information.
- This means that people with limited health literacy:
 - Cannot circle the date of a medical appointment on a hospital appointment slip.
 - Cannot identify how often a person should have a specified medical test, based on information in a clearly written pamphlet.
 - Cannot identify what it is permissible to drink before a medical test, based on a set of short instructions.
 - Cannot explain why it is difficult for people to know if they have a specific chronic medical condition, based on information in a one-page article about the medical condition.
 - Cannot give two reasons a person with no symptoms of a specific disease should be tested for the disease, based on information in a clearly written pamphlet.

Low health literacy affects all of us...but some more than others.¹

While ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by low health literacy, the majority of those with low health literacy skills in the United States are white, native-born Americans.

Among Hispanic adults, 41% have poor health literacy skills and among Black adults, 24% have poor health literacy skills.

Almost one-third of adults over the age of 65 have very poor health literacy skills. Only 10.4 million seniors nationwide can perform the most simple and concrete literacy skills. Adults who receive Medicare or Medicaid, and those with no insurance, have lower than average health literacy.

How does this affect all of us?

Adults with low health literacy:

- Are less likely to comply with prescribed treatment and self-care regimens²
- Make more medication or treatment errors²
- Fail to seek preventive care²
- Are at higher risk for hospitalization than people with adequate literacy skills³
- Remain in hospital nearly 2 days longer⁴
- Lack the skills needed to navigate the health care system²

The lack of health literacy skills also carries significant financial costs. Estimates by the Georgetown University Center on an Aging Society indicate that additional health care expenditures due to low health literacy skills are about \$73 billion in 1998 health care dollars.⁵

What can policy makers do?

- Learn more about the health literacy epidemic and how it impacts the constituents you serve and the healthcare providers in your area.
- Join the Partnership for Clear Health Communication whose mission is to build awareness and advance solutions to improve health literacy and positively impact health outcomes. The Partnership is a national, non-profit coalition of organizations. It is the country's leading resource for information and advocacy around improving health literacy. www.p4chc.org
- For additional information on health literacy, visit the Institute of Medicine Web site at www.iom.edu and the NAAL information page on the National Center for Education Statistics Web site at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/>. Explore easy to implement and low cost solutions to the health literacy crisis. Pfizer Inc's Clear Health Communication Web site has links to research and tools that are available free of charge. www.clearhealthcommunication.org. The American Medical Association Foundation Web site also provides information on health literacy news and resources. www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/9931.html.
- Work to get standards and policies that will recognize provider efforts to communicate clearly.

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. Weiss, BD. 20 Common Problems in Primary Care. McGraw Hill. December 1999
3. Baker DW, Parker RM, Williams MV, Clark WS. Health Literacy and the Risk of Hospital Admission. Journal of General Internal Medicine. 1998; (13): 791-798.
4. Kirsch IS, Jugebut A, Jenkins L, Kolstad A. Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey. Washington, DC: Department of Education 1993.
5. Low Health Literacy Skills Increase Annual Health Care Expenditures by \$73 Billion. Center on an Aging Society. Georgetown University. 1999.