

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Health Literacy Supports Quality of Life | **October 2021**



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Health Literacy Supports Quality of Life

In recognition of Health Literacy Month, WorkCare's Wellness Monthly for October discusses the importance of being an informed health care consumer.

Anyone with a computer or smartphone can find virtually anything about health online, interpret the information in accordance with their educational level and world view, and if they are inclined, become their own diagnostician and care provider.

According to the [Pew Research Center](#), at least 93 percent of American adults use the internet, and up to

82 percent of them have done health-related web searches. However, studies also show a significant percentage of adults have difficulty understanding health information. Meanwhile, health-related decisions are becoming more complex, and chronic diseases rates and medical costs are climbing.

Health Literacy Defined

There are many ways to define health literacy. Here are three examples:

- "Health literacy is our ability to figure out what's needed for you, and for others, to stay alive, safe and as well as possible." (Janet Ohene-Frempong, Strategic Partner for Health Literacy, Institute for Healthcare Advancement)
- "Personal health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others." (U.S. [Healthy People 2030](#) initiative)
- "Health literacy implies the achievement of a level of knowledge, personal skills and confidence to take action to improve personal and community health by changing personal lifestyles and living conditions...By improving people's access to health information, and their capacity to use it effectively, health literacy is critical to empowerment." (Health Promotion Glossary)

Literacy is a social determinant of personal health. Health literacy offers the opportunity to access evidence-based sources to increase awareness about personal health risks and disease prevention and management recommendations. Reliable online resources are also helpful when evaluating acute symptoms and deciding whether an illness or injury can be safely self-treated or a medical professional should be consulted.

Without health literacy, people are more likely to have misconceptions about their health status. They may not have the capacity to advocate on behalf of children, elders and others who need help navigating the health care system. Lack of literacy can lead to

incorrect assumptions about symptoms, disease states and remedies. Poorly informed health care consumers may refuse a safe intervention or accept an unsafe or ineffective one, or be under-treated or over-treated.

What Can You Do?

Health literacy is a complex process that begins in childhood with reading comprehension and spans a lifetime. The way people approach health care decisions is influenced by their current health status and other factors including their age, education, socio-economic status, ethnicity, cultural background, political and religious beliefs, perceptions and behaviors.

Here are some ways you can become an even more astute health care consumer:

- **Verify sources:** When doing health-related research, investigate your sources of information to ensure they are valid and reliable. This is particularly important if you access news feeds and social media. Is information coming from a commercial, quasi-commercial, governmental, academic or news organization? Who finances the source? Does the author or organization have a blatant or subtle bias? What is the country of origin?
- **Be health conscious:** Health literacy includes understanding your personal health risks and getting recommended preventive exams and vaccinations for your gender and age. Consistency with exercise, nutritious diet and quality sleep are also important.
- **Review coverage:** If you are enrolled in a health benefits plan, leverage features that target your health risks. This includes physical and mental health care options, and dental and vision coverage. If you do not have insurance or have a high-deductible plan, ask a professional for advice on affordable coverage. Skipping needed care has costly physical, social and financial consequences in the long run.
- **Prepare for visits:** Prepare in advance for medical appointments by writing down symptoms or concerns and any medications you take. Select a provider who takes time to explain your treatment plan. This may include information about alternative approaches that are not typically part of conventional medical care or have origins outside of usual Western practice. In turn, be respectful about the

medical professional's training and experience. Providers appreciate well-informed patients who are willing to listen. If you do not have a primary care physician, consider developing a relationship with one. A practitioner who knows you can provide useful guidance as your needs change over the years.

- **Be inquisitive:** Request clarification when medical advice is not clear. Ask questions about the reasons for recommended diagnostic tests or treatments, and about side-effects of prescribed medications. Write down or record information you receive from medical providers in case you have difficulty remembering all the details. If you are assisting an adult friend or family member, seek permission to speak with their provider. Ask for a translator if literacy is better in another language. Do not expect a family member to translate.

Plain Language

Plain language makes it easier for everyone to understand and use health information. The [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) requires federal agencies to train staff and use plain language when they communicate with the public. To learn more, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Clear Communication Index](#), a research-based tool that can be used to increase clarity and aid understanding of public messages and materials. Here are some additional health literacy resources:

- [Communication, cultural competence, information technology and usability](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- [Health Literacy Solutions Center](#) (Institute for Healthcare Advancement)
- [Improvement tools, professional education and training, publications](#) (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality)
- [Reports, research, special population groups, education standards, U.S. and international health literacy websites](#) (CDC)
- [Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective](#) (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services)