

Health Literacy Tips for Health Care Providers

Health literacy is: The degree to which individuals can obtain, process, and understand the basic health information and services they need to make appropriate health decisions.

Impacts of low health literacy include:

- Poor management of chronic diseases
- Poor ability to understand and adhere to medication regimes
- Increased hospitalization
- Poor health outcomes



It is estimated that 60% of Canadians have low health literacy and in Canada, 88% of seniors have low health literacy.

Given that more than a third of Canadians have limited health literacy it is important that we operate using universal precautions when communicating with and educating patients and their families. Universal precautions are needed because health care providers do not always know which patients have limited health literacy and in health care, it is appropriate to assume that even those who are moderately or highly health literate, may have difficulty processing information when coping with illness. The challenge is that many health care providers do not know how to do this and many patients do not know how to ask for more help.

If you would like more information about health literacy or would like an in-service for your team/department on health literacy, contact the Patient Education Program Manager at your site:

Toronto General Elke Ruthig: elke.ruthig@uhn.ca

Toronto Western Rita Kang: rita.kang@uhn.ca

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Health Literacy Tips for Health Care Providers

There are 5 universal precautions you can take to address health literacy gaps for all patients and families:

1. Conduct patient and family-centered visits

- Encourage questions
- Pause to show you are listening
- Listen more

2. Explain things clearly using plain language

- Use plain language
- Slow down

3. Focus on key messages and repeat

- Offer a pen and paper to encourage questions and show your interest
- Limit your teaching to 1-3 points
- Review and repeat key points

4. Use 'teach back' or 'show me' techniques

- Use teach back

5. Use patient and family educational materials to enhance interaction

- Provide information in writing
- Build your own patient education toolkit to support your communication and teaching

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