

Features

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What you don't understand can be hazardous to your health

"Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion," a report completed by the Institute of Medicine, states that nearly half of all American adults - 90 million people - have difficulty understanding and using health information. In addition, there is a higher rate of hospitalization and use of emergency services among patients with limited health literacy.

At some point, most people will encounter health information they cannot understand, and even well-educated people with strong reading and writing skills may have trouble comprehending a medical form or a doctor's instructions regarding a drug or procedure. The lack of health literacy is more than this.

Health literacy is defined as the "degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic information and services needed to make appropriate decisions regarding their health." It involves the ability to read, write, listen, use math and be able to understand concepts. Oral language skills are important as well. Patients need to be able to explain their health concerns and describe their symptoms accurately. They need to ask questions, and they need to understand spoken medical advice or treatment directions.

In an age of shared responsibility between physician and patient for health care, patients need strong decision-making skills. With the development of the Internet as a source of health information, health literacy may also include the ability to search the Internet and evaluate Web sites. The problem of low health literacy affects people from all ages, races and income and education levels.

Limited health literacy can lead to difficulty in:

- locating providers and services,
- filling out complex health forms,
- sharing medical history with providers,
- seeking preventive health care,
- knowing the connection between risky behaviors and health problems,
- managing chronic health conditions, and
- understanding directions on medicine.

Studies over time have shown that having trouble understanding medical information is bad for one's health. New research shows it could even be deadly. A 2007 study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine reports that individuals with low levels of health literacy have less health knowledge, worse self-management and preventive services, and worse health. The study also points out that people who have trouble understanding medical information and instructions are harder to manage if they have chronic illnesses, and this can lead to declining health, frequent hospitalizations and, ultimately, death.

Individuals with limited health literacy were found to have medical expenses up to four times greater than those of patients with adequate literacy skills, costing the health care system billions of dollars every year in unnecessary doctor visits and hospital stays. Compounding the problem is the fact that patients hide their confusion from their doctors because they are too ashamed and intimidated to ask for help.

There are several things you can do to help yourself or a loved one understand information provided by a health care provider:

1. Having instructions outlined in just three key points can help make information more understandable.
2. At the end of the visit, repeat what you have been told to the health care provider to make sure you understood what he or she said.
3. Ask for information to be explained without medical jargon.
4. Have things explained both verbally and in writing.
5. If the information is in writing and you have trouble reading it, ask for a large-print brochure/handout or have it enlarged on the computer.
6. Ask if there is a picture to explain the information or if someone can draw a picture.
7. Ask for information to be provided in simple language with short sentences.
8. Ask questions if you don't understand.
9. Consider taking someone with you on your visit to assist in remembering what needs to be done.
10. If you don't understand how to take a specific medication, ask the health provider to slowly explain what you should do, or talk to the pharmacist about proper procedure and storage.
11. Never sign anything that you don't fully understand. If you don't speak English well, ask for the same information to be stated in your primary language or for an interpreter. Whatever you do, don't make assumptions about what you were told or what you are supposed to do. If you don't understand, ask for clarification.

Finally, remember that in just a short while we will be electing a new president. If you haven't already seen the movie "Sicko" by Michael Moore, rent it from the video store and make sure you have seen it. His movie is powerful, well-stated and necessary.

Health literacy requires having the knowledge you need to make healthy decisions. Our health care system needs to be changed so as to ensure that everyone receives quality health care, especially our children, and so that health care providers are encouraged to stay rather than getting burned out and leaving. Make sure you have accurate and appropriate information to get the kind of care you need.