

# Health Literacy...Do Adults Understand?

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, nearly 9 out of 10 adults do not have proficient health literacy and therefore may not have the skills required to manage their health and prevent disease.

## YOU CAN'T TELL BY LOOKING

### You must assess what each individual can understand

Health literacy is... "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions." It's more than reading and writing skills, and includes the ability to:

- Understand complex vocabulary and concepts including medical terms or probability and risk;
- Share personal information with providers about health history and symptoms;
- Make decisions about basic behaviors like healthy eating & exercise;
- Engage in self-care and chronic-disease management;
- Understand instructions on prescription drug bottles, appointment slips, health brochures, physician directions, consent forms; and
- Navigate a complex healthcare system from walking hospital corridors to filling out insurance forms.

(Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Institute of Medicine; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Healthy People 2010)

### Why is Health Literacy Important?

- Limited health literacy is associated with medication errors, increased health care costs and inadequate knowledge and care for chronic health conditions;
- Up to 80% of patients forget what they are told as soon as they leave the office;
- The CDC has found that literacy skills are the strongest predictor of individual health status;
- > 77 million adults have basic or below basic health literacy; and
- Adults > 63 years have lower health literacy scores than all other age groups.

### Which Individuals are MOST at Risk?

- Compromised health status
- Low income level
- Less than high school education
- Non native English speakers
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Older adults

For additional resources on Health Literacy, please visit our website at <http://wakeahec.org/pdf/library/HLresources.pdf>.

## Who is Responsible for Improving Health Literacy? WE ALL ARE!!

### *Tips for teaching and/or health literacy materials:*

- Speak slowly and use plain, simple, jargon-free language
- Use short sentences with simple pictures or examples
- Provide small pieces of information at a time
- Provide clear headings, bullets and ample white space
- Provide cultural appropriateness
- Emphasize desired behavior rather than medical information
- Use teach back - show me method: have patients show or explain what they are supposed to do

### *Common Myths:*

*Myth:* People will tell you they can't read.

*Fact:* Since there is a strong social stigma attached to limited reading and writing skills, nearly all nonreaders or poor readers will seek to conceal this fact. For example, some may invite a family member to accompany them to the doctor's office to help them fill out forms.

*Myth:* Years of schooling are a good measure of literacy level.

*Fact:* Years of schooling tell what people have been exposed to, not what reading skill they acquired. Surveys show that, on average, adults currently read three to five grade levels lower than the years of schooling completed.

(Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

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