

Parental Health Literacy and Its Impact on Patient Care



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KEYWORDS

- Health literacy • Health literacy levels • Health literacy screening tools
- Pediatric health literacy • Assessing health literacy

KEY POINTS

- General health literacy is the greatest individual factor affecting a person's health status.
- Health literacy skills are grouped into the categories of clinical, preventive, and navigational ability.
- Health literacy is categorized into 4 levels: proficient, intermediate, basic, or below basic.
- Multiple health literacy tools exist that can be administered in less than 5 minutes.
- Children of parents with low literacy may have worse health outcomes.

A 12-month-old is referred to infant-toddler services to evaluate speech and motor skills that are slightly delayed on developmental testing. Despite several referrals, the family has not filled out the required paperwork for the program. At a return appointment, the clinic nurse asks the mother about the form and is handed the paperwork with many of the questions left blank. As she sits and reads the form aloud to the parent, she realizes that the mother cannot understand many of the questions and has been too embarrassed to ask for assistance.

INTRODUCTION

The process of navigating through the modern American health care system is becoming progressively more challenging. The range of tasks asked of patients in the digital age is vast and complex. These tasks can include completing intricate insurance applications, signing complex consent forms, and translating medical data and prescription medication directions. Nearly 9 out of 10 adults have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely offered by medical providers. Mounting evidence now supports a growing awareness that general health literacy is the greatest individual factor affecting a person's health status (**Fig. 1**).^{1,2}

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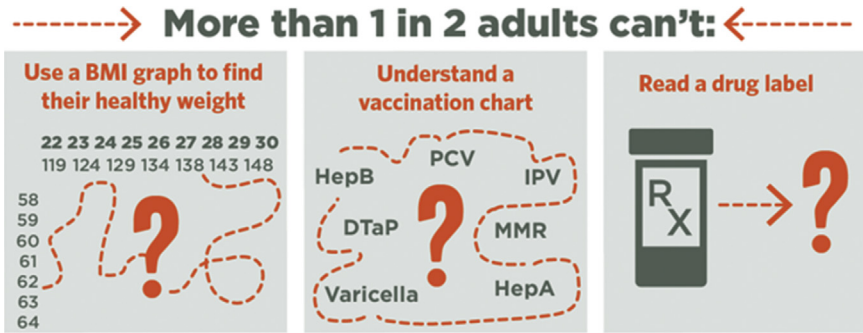


Fig. 1. General health literacy statistics. BMI, body mass index; DTaP, diphtheria tetanus acellular pertussis vaccine; HepA, hepatitis A; HepB, hepatitis B; IPV, inactivated polio vaccine; MMR, measles mumps rubella; PCV, pneumococcal conjugated vaccine; RX, medical prescription. (From Kutner M, Greenberg E, Jin Y, et al. The health literacy of America's adults: results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006-483). US Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics; 2006. p. 6.)

WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?

Health literacy is a complex entity. It is broadly defined by Healthy People 2010 as the degree to which persons have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand the basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health-related decisions.¹ Like general literacy, it depends on multiple areas, including¹:

- Understanding the written word
- Ability to read out loud
- Calculations
- Speculation on outcomes

In pediatrics, practitioners are faced with the responsibility of addressing both the parents' and children's literacy skills. There is growing evidence that health status and access to care in children may be linked to the level of parental health literacy.²⁻⁷ It is for this reason that the importance of understanding health literacy is being recognized as a key factor in the improvement of the overall health of the American public and as a way to decrease the widening health disparities that exist across the country.

Although the field of health literacy began in the 1990s, it was not widely studied or appreciated until the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) report was released almost a decade ago.² This study of 19,000 Americans was pivotal in providing an insight into the definition, staging, and initial understanding of the current state of American health literacy. Health literacy skills are functional and involve tasks that are grouped into the categories of²:

- Clinical ability (case 1)
- Preventive ability (case 2)
- Navigational ability (case 3)

HEALTH LITERACY TASKS

The following cases are examples of the types of health literacy task measured by the NAAL in determining overall health literacy.²

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