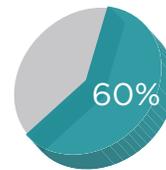


Communicating with Patients with Low Health Literacy

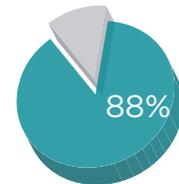


ABC Health Matters

Low health literacy is a problem that affects health outcomes. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, 60% of adults and 88% of seniors have low health literacy. This can cause difficulty for people in accessing, understanding and communicating information about their health. As a result, they are less able to make good health decisions for themselves and for those in their care.



Adults



Seniors

Low health literacy can lead to:

- ▶ Poorer health (lower life expectancy, more accidents, higher rates of a wide range of diseases and associated morbidity)
- ▶ Medication use errors
- ▶ Increased burden on the health care system in emergency care, chronic disease treatment, etc.

In Canada, 60% of adults and 88% of seniors have low health literacy.

Public Health Agency of Canada.

As a health care provider, you can help to ensure the information and advice you provide is understood and remembered.

Here are some strategies to enhance clear communication:

<p>Ask if the patient would like a family member or friend to sit in</p>	<p>This can be especially important when the patient has a serious health condition. When we are anxious, it is more difficult to absorb and remember information.</p>
<p>Use simple language rather than technical jargon</p>	<p>Say, “high blood pressure” rather than “hypertension”; “you don’t have breast cancer” rather than “your mammogram was negative.” Speak more slowly, and leave room for questions.</p>
<p>Use an open-ended approach to encourage questions</p>	<p>Asking “What questions do you have?” normalizes the need for clarification.</p>
<p>Use a “teach-back” technique</p>	<p>Ask the patient to repeat back in their own words what you have told them. Some tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make it a test of your skill, not theirs. Say something like, “I like to ask patients to repeat things back to me to make sure I have explained it well,” or “We covered a lot today. Let’s review the three things you are going to do to follow up.” ▶ Chunk and check. When there is a lot of information, ask the patient to summarize after you’ve made a few key points – don’t wait until the end of the appointment. ▶ Ask the patient to demonstrate a newly-learned skill (e.g. using an inhaler, testing blood sugar).
<p>Summarize 1-3 key points at the end of the appointment</p>	<p>What are the most important things for your patient to remember?</p>
<p>Write down important instructions and terms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A note clearly spelling out the name of their condition, the name and dosage of any recommended medication, and other treatment instructions, will help patients follow through properly. ▶ “If you take 200 milligrams of Co-Q10 for 2 weeks before you start the statin, it may reduce side effects.” It’s helpful for a patient to have instructions clearly written down so that can refer to the note if they forget.
<p>Offer educational materials</p>	<p>Clearly written materials allow patients to absorb the information at their own speed, at home, after their appointment. If you suspect that the patient struggles with reading, ask if there is a family member or friend who may be able to help.</p>