

# Health Literacy

*“The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”*

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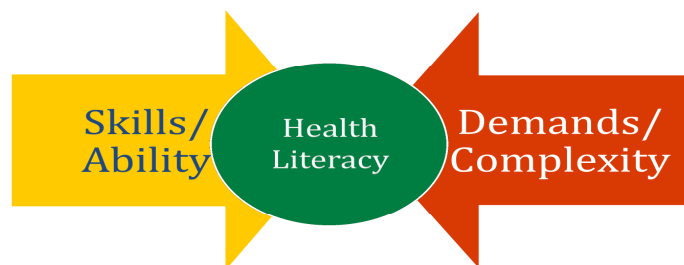
## Why is health literacy important?

- Health literacy is essential for successful access to care and use of services, self-care of chronic conditions, and maintenance of health and wellness.
- Health literacy is fundamental to healthcare that requires individuals to have a more active role in decisions and management.
- The IOM reports that 90 million people, nearly half our adult population, lack health literacy skills needed to understand and act on health information and health system demands.<sup>1</sup>
- Only 12% of U.S. adults have the health literacy proficiency to perform complex health tasks such as using a table to calculate an employee’s share of health insurance costs.<sup>2</sup>

## What do we know about health literacy?

- Problems with health literacy affect all people, but the elderly and chronically ill are most at-risk, and also have the greatest healthcare needs and expenses.
- Poor health literacy is "a stronger predictor of a person's health than age, income, employment status, education level, and race".<sup>3</sup>
- People with low health literacy are overwhelmed by healthcare because their **skills and abilities** are challenged by the **demands and complexity** required.

### *A Framework for Health Literacy*



*Health literacy occurs when information and services needed for health are aligned with skills and abilities of those needing them.*

**Efforts to improve quality, reduce disparities and reduce costs cannot succeed without improving health literacy.**

### People with low health literacy:<sup>4</sup>

- Are less able to care for their chronic conditions
- Use more healthcare services—visits and longer stays
- Have higher mortality rates, especially from cardiovascular disease
- Are more likely to engage in unsafe or inappropriate use of prescription or over-the-counter medications
- Are less likely to use preventive health services
- Have difficulty navigating the health care system



## A health literate society could save excess health care costs estimated at \$73 billion\*.

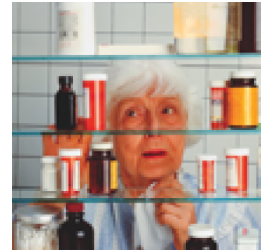
### An example: A health literate male patient with diabetes knows

- ✓ His cholesterol level, blood pressure, and body mass index (BMI)-and what these mean for his health
- ✓ Best practices for his diet and exercise
- ✓ What medicines he takes and safe and effective use
- ✓ His immunization status and to get a flu shot every year
- ✓ To check his feet regularly and get regular eye exams
- ✓ How to choose the best health plan, doctor, dentist and pharmacists
- ✓ Correct use of over the counter medicines

## What Can Be Done?

### The burden does not lie solely on the individual health consumer.

“If public and private organizations make it a priority to become health literate, the nation’s health literacy can be advanced to the point at which it will play a major role in improving health care and health for all Americans”<sup>5</sup>.



### View health literacy as fundamental to health, and essential for improving quality and reducing costs and disparities.

- Incentivize accountable care organizations (ACO)’s and patient centered medical homes (PCMH) to *be* health literate, guided by the 10 Attributes of a Health Literate Organizations.  
**Goal:** Align demands/complexity of health care with skills/abilities of users
- Streamline Medicaid enrollment across states to improve consumer understanding and use.
- Support monitoring and evaluation of the Plain Language Act of 2010 implementation.  
**Goal:** Compliance across HHS, improving the public’s ability to use essential health documents
- Support and monitor efforts to expand health literacy skills and competency of work force.
- Understand and promote safe medication use as an issue at the intersection of health literacy and quality care. **Goal:** Systematic improvements in patient-centered, standardized medication labels
- Seek opportunities to leverage technology as communication tools continue to shift to digital platform.
- Incentivize efforts in prevention, self-care, care coordination, and quality that utilize a health literate approach.  
**Goal:** The demands/complexity of what is needed aligns with the skills/abilities of those needing information, care and services.

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Medicine. Health Literacy: A prescription to end confusion. Nielsen-Bohlman L, Panzer A, Kindig DA, editors. Washington, D.C., National Academy Press 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., & Paulsen, C. (2006). *The Health Literacy of America’s Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006-483)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Report on the Council of Scientific Affairs, Ad Hoc Committee on Health Literacy for the Council on Scientific Affairs, AMA, *JAMA*, Feb 10, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsliteracy.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Koh et al. New Federal Policy Initiatives To Boost Health Literacy Can Help The Nation Move Beyond The Cycle Of Costly 'Crisis Care' *Health Affairs*, , no. (2012); doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2011.1169