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.”

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.¹
- 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.²

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".³
- 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:⁴
- 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
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”5.

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.
  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.

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


*in 1998 dollars.