



In the Know:

Health literacy news and best practices

December 2020

Ensuring a healthy future with health literacy

Since 1980, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People initiative has set measurable objectives to improve the health and well-being of people across the country.

This year, the initiative launched [Healthy People 2030](#). It lays out data-driven national objectives needed to improve peoples' health over the next decade. We're excited to see that health literacy is a central focus of these new goals!

Healthy People 2030 shares two new definitions. These definitions acknowledge that organizations have a responsibility to address health literacy.

- **Personal health literacy** is the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.
- **Organizational health literacy** is the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.



New measures

Healthy People 2030 says that health information and messages are often overly complex. [The initiative lays out several objectives to improve health communication](#), including the following.

Increase the proportion of adults whose health care provider checked their understanding. Health care providers can help people understand health information by asking them to describe how they'll follow the instructions in their own words. This is the first step of the teach-back method. [Learn more about the method here.](#)

Decrease the proportion of adults who report poor communication with their health care provider. Good communication between health care providers and patients is part of high-quality care, but many people have trouble talking with their health care providers. That is why it's important to use plain language that people understand the first time they hear or read it. [Learn more and access our plain language resources here.](#)

Increase the proportion of adults whose health care providers involved them in decisions as much as they wanted. Evidence shows that most people want to participate in making decisions about their health. Shared decision-making — when people and their health care providers work together to make decisions — can lead to higher patient satisfaction and better health outcomes. [Learn more about shared decision-making best practices here.](#)

Plain language examples for vaccines

Between the annual flu shot and the new COVID vaccines, there is a lot of talk about vaccinations right now! Some of the words and phrases can be confusing.

Here are some plain language translations for common vaccine terms.

Vaccinations/immunizations:

When a person is given medicine to make their body learn to fight a disease.

Adverse reaction: An unexpected health outcome — like redness or an allergic reaction.

Antibody: A protein your body makes to fight illness.

Clinical trial: The testing of medical drugs, vaccines or procedures in human volunteers to see if they are useful and safe.

Herd immunity: When a large part of a population can fight off a disease so that the disease cannot spread as easily.

Live virus vaccine: A vaccine that contains a weakened version of the disease so your body learns to fight it off.

Killed virus vaccine: A vaccine that does not contain a weakened version of the disease.

News Year's resolutions: Health literacy edition

This year we're bringing a new perspective on the New Year's resolution tradition – health literacy!

Here are some resolutions providers can adopt to increase health literacy at their organizations.

1. **Audit your written materials.** Make sure they use plain language, are easy to read and understand, and are available in all necessary languages.
2. **Get creative.** Find new ways to work with patients – like allowing patients' to audio record your care instructions.
3. **Confirm understanding.** Use the [teach-back method](#) with at least one patient every day to make sure they understand your instructions.
4. **Stop using one acronym or medical term.** Is there a word you often say that is confusing to patients? Swap it out for a plain language alternative.
5. **Rephrase a popular question.** Instead of asking “do you have any questions?” ask patients “what questions do you have?”

New Year's Resolutions

HEALTH LITERACY EDITION

1. Audit your materials
2. Get creative
3. Confirm understanding
4. Stop using one acronym or confusing medical term
5. Ask “What questions do you have?” instead of “Do you have any questions?”

In the Know:
Health literacy news and best practices

Supported by
 **BlueCross
BlueShield**
Minnesota

By the numbers

- Improving health literacy could prevent nearly 1 million hospital visits and save over \$25 billion each year.
- On average, U.S. counties with the highest health literacy levels experienced 31% more flu shots and 26% fewer avoidable hospitalizations.

Source: [United Health Group health literacy study, 2020.](#)

Follow us on social media

Stay up-to-date on health literacy best practices, tips and events.



@MNHealthLit



@MNHealthLit



@Minnesota
Health Literacy
Partnership

healthliteracymn.org