



**GUIDE**

# Health Literacy Linked to Health Outcomes

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines health literacy as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”<sup>1</sup> Even a highly educated person may find it hard to navigate the health care system. Medical jargon, confusing paperwork, and cultural barriers can affect care.

In the following pages, explore the ways health literacy can impact health outcomes—and what organizations can do to communicate clearly and effectively when it comes to health.

**Did you know *nine out of ten* patients may have low health literacy?**

**Continue reading for tips to improve your communications and actionable next steps.**

**LET'S GO**

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Poor health literacy has huge implications for the future of healthcare. People with low health literacy:

- Have higher risks of poor health outcomes
- Are more likely to suffer from chronic disease
- Have higher rates of hospitalization
- Are less likely to access all of the benefits covered by their health plan, including preventive exams

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, poor health literacy costs the U.S. \$106-236 billion a year.<sup>1</sup>

## How Health Literacy Impacts Health Outcomes

Have you ever read a book, article, or how-to guide full of information that went over your head? We've all been there. It's frustrating. And you probably respond in one of two ways: Take the time to re-read, study, and learn the information, or give up and do something else.

Now think about the information you're giving your Medicaid and Medicare populations. Is it written in a way that's easy to understand? Does it make sense? Will it help someone use their benefits, adopt healthier behaviors, or make an appointment with a doctor? Maybe not.



***Nearly 9 out of 10 patients may have low health literacy.***

According to National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy, nearly 9 out of 10 adults have difficulty using and understanding routine health information. That means that a strong majority of your patients or members may be unable to understand health information well enough to make informed

<sup>1</sup> National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy, US Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved August 13, 2021 from [https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Health\\_Literacy\\_Action\\_Plan.pdf](https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Health_Literacy_Action_Plan.pdf)

decisions when it comes to making lifestyle changes, taking medications as prescribed, or getting recommended screenings. More than 300 studies have shown that most people don't understand health information they've been given.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of patient-centered care aims to improve outcomes and reduce healthcare costs. The basis of payment models is evolving to align to these goals now more than ever. It is critical that the individuals you serve understand the advice, guidance, and instructions you are providing to them — and how to take any necessary actions to achieve optimal health.

**Sometimes, we assume that we are using basic terminology in our communications.** Yet, that assumption can negatively impact the quality of care received, the steps taken to change behaviors to prevent chronic disease, the use of insurance benefits, or medication adherence.

Vulnerable populations include immigrants, minorities, seniors, and low income populations. But **limited health literacy transcends age, gender, income, ethnicity, and education level.** The ability to understand and communicate health information is influenced by factors such as:

- Language
- Cultural background
- Complexity of information
- Ability to process new concepts

## Understanding CLAS Standards

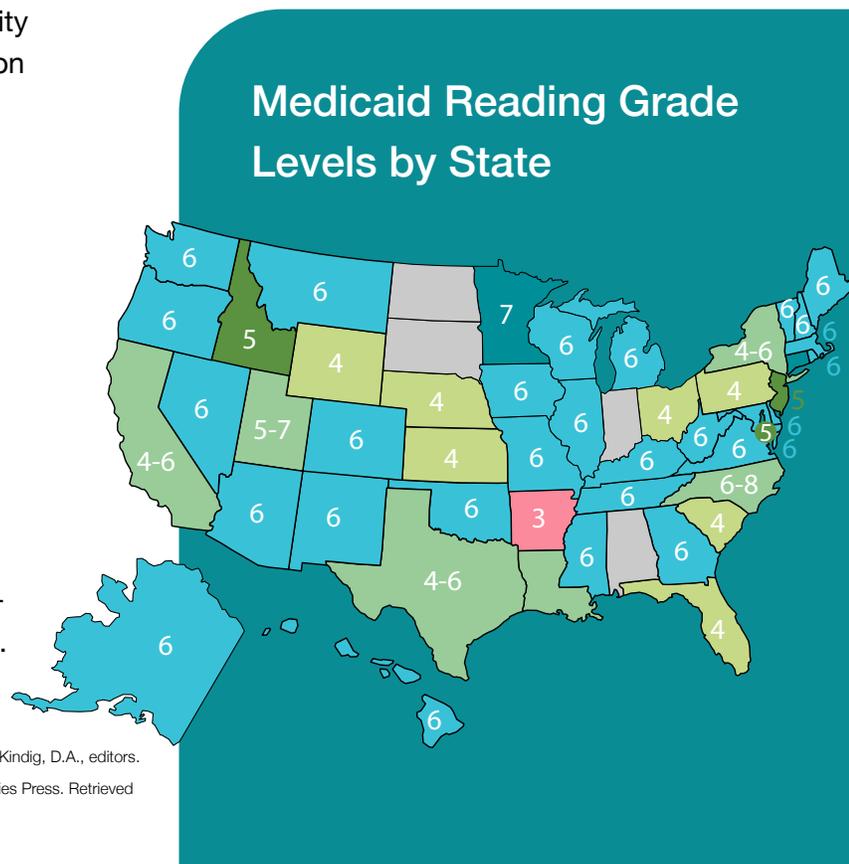
Recognizing health literacy as a public health issue, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) developed a national action plan to improve health literacy. The plan outlines large-scale goals for creating health literacy nationwide.

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Health Literacy; Nielsen-Bohlman, L., Panzer, A.M., Kindig, D.A., editors. (2004). Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Retrieved January 27, 2017 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK216033/>

The Office of Minority Health at HHS developed [National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services \(CLAS\)](#), standards intended to advance health equity, improve quality and help eliminate health care disparities. The standards provide a blueprint for individuals and healthcare organizations to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

In addition, the majority of U.S. states have instituted grade-level minimums for written health information and education materials. These grade levels range from third grade in Arkansas, to eighth grade in North Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Each state in the U.S. sets its own literacy standards for information being consumed by its Medicaid population. It is critical to keep state guidelines in mind when providing written health information.

Health information is communicated in different forms across many different communication methods. Professionals touching all of these areas must work together to present health information that is understandable.



## Improve Your Communications

Making health information more understandable and accessible can break down barriers to effective care. It can help patients adopt recommended lifestyle changes, prevent disease, and manage chronic conditions to lessen their impact.

To impact change, all member and patient-facing content should be:

- Readable and understandable
- Friendly and engaging
- Visual
- Positive and respectful

Health and wellness providers need to ensure an individual has a clear understanding of their risks and what steps they need to take in order to improve their health. Completing a health risk assessment (HRA) is a first step. An HRA should be designed and written with health literacy in mind.

The use of color, design, and illustrations should make the user experience engaging and easy to follow.

- The content must be easy to read
- Common words should be used in place of medical jargon whenever possible
- When a complex word must be used, it should be explained

## Actionable Next Steps Towards Health Literacy

### Learn About Health Literacy

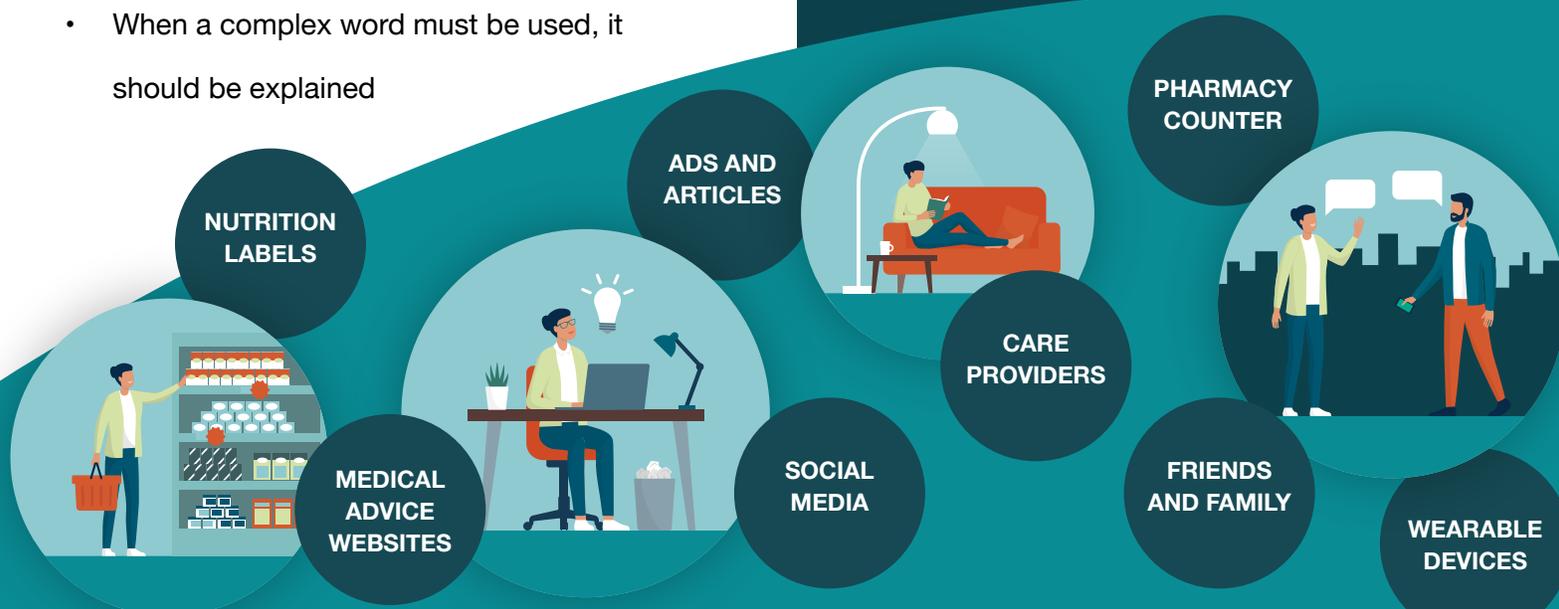
The CDC offers an online [Health Literacy for Public Health Professionals](#) course. Continuing education credit is available.

### Understand the Attributes of a Health Literate Organization

The Committee on Health Literacy at the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies has produced the whitepaper, [Ten Attributes of Health Literate Health Care Organizations](#), outlining the steps to “make it easier for people to understand, and use information and services.”

### Test the Readability of Your Content

Access resources for testing your messages and materials [on the CDC website](#), including how to test the usability of documents, creating accessible content and multilingual websites, and more.



Health Information is Everywhere

# Health Literacy and Wellsource Products

Wellsource has kept health literacy in mind when developing our health risk assessment products. Wellcomplete™ for Medicare and Wellcomplete™ for Medicaid are written at an engaging and respectful fourth grade reading level.

Health plans and providers use the Wellcomplete for Medicare HRA as a required component of an Annual Wellness Visit (AWV). Wellcomplete for Medicaid is used as a first step in patient engagement and care management.

A companion product to Wellcomplete, HealthShelf® offers interactive health education with a collection of articles, quizzes, self-assessments, how-to guides, and recipes for healthy meals.

Together, these tools can be used as a starting point to create a proactive disease prevention plan for individuals.

## Additional Wellsource Resources



GUIDE

### The Value of Self-Reported Population Health Data

*Explore why self-reported data is essential for population health initiatives, and how you can be assured that the information you collect will provide the necessary insights to create impactful wellness programs.*

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### Increase Medicaid Engagement with HRA Data

*Engage Medicaid populations with personalized approaches that speak to an individual's specific health risks.*

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For more information about Wellsource products, [request a consultation](#)

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For four decades, Wellsource has been personalizing population health by designing innovative Health Risk Assessments that are grounded in modern evidence-based medicine. Wellsource uses the power of technology to drive informed decisions with actionable data for health plans, wellness organizations, and companies committed to improving wellness.

Our Health Risk Assessments for the Workforce, for Medicare, and for Medicaid are NCQA certified and used for predicting health risks and reducing avoidable costs.

Learn more at [wellsource.com](http://wellsource.com)