



What Is Health Literacy?



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.”² 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.

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

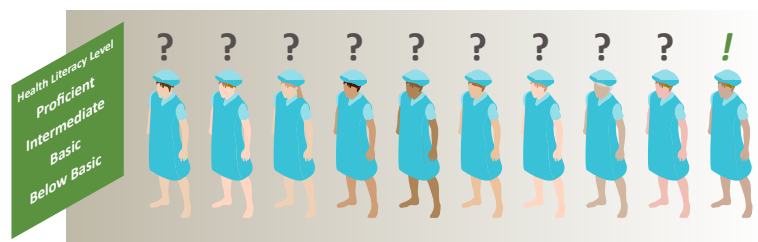
According to the Department of Health and Human Services, poor health literacy costs the U.S. \$106-236 billion a year.²

Health Literacy Linked to 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?

Chances are that it won’t. Here’s why:



9 out of 10 patients have low health literacy

According to a National Assessment of Adult Literacy, only 12% of U.S. adults have proficient health literacy. That means that nearly 9 in 10 of your patients or members may be unable to understand health information well enough to make needed lifestyle changes, take medications as prescribed, or get recommended screenings. More than 300 studies have shown that most people don’t understand health information they’ve been given.¹

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.



“Doc, could you talk a little slower?”



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

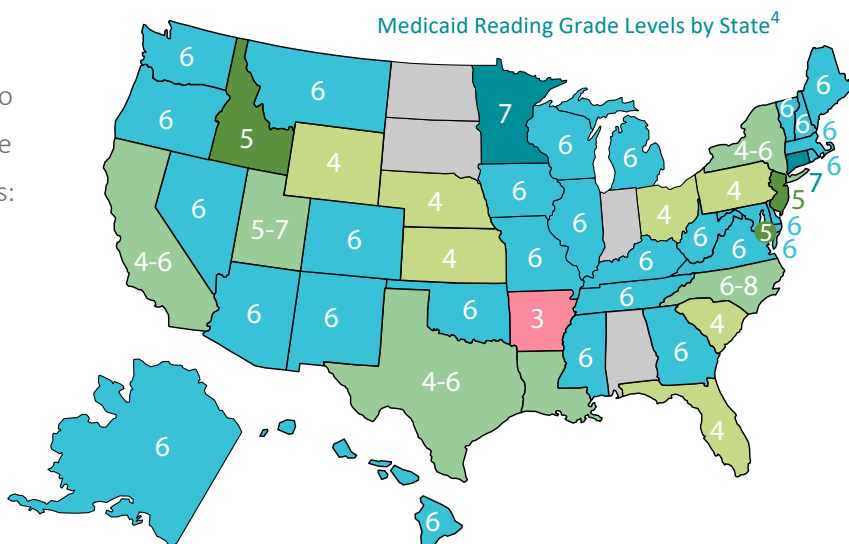
health information is influenced by factors such as:

- the language we speak,
- our cultural background,
- the complexity of information,
- and our ability to process new concepts.

CLAS standards provide guidelines

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

In addition, 45 states and the District of Columbia have instituted grade-level minimums for written health information and education materials. These grade levels range from third grade in Arkansas up to eighth grade in North Carolina.⁴ 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



Where does your population see health information?

- Nutrition labels
- Prescription labels
- Tv / radio ads and programs
- Magazine / web ads and articles
- Medical advice websites
- Discussions with care providers
- Pharmacies
- Friends and family

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.

Guide to Your Personal Report

LEARN ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

Health Terms Used In Your Report

Overall Wellness Score is a quick view of how you're doing. It shows you are doing well. Less than that means it's time to make a change. Read through this guide. Decide what you want to do first. It will take time to form new healthy habits. But if you keep at it, your score will be higher next year.

Health Age is a measure of how old your body is compared to your actual age. It is based on factors like your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar. You can be as young as 30 or as old as 60. Or you can have the health of someone 30 years younger or 30 years older. You can lower your health age by making healthy choices.

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against your blood vessels. An optimal blood pressure is below 120/80. The first number is the pressure as your heart pumps blood through the vessels. This is called **systolic** pressure. The second number is the pressure when the vessels relax between heartbeats. It's called **diastolic** pressure.

Cholesterol is a kind of fat called lipids in the blood. It's healthy to have some cholesterol. But when you have too much, the lipids collect on artery walls. This can make your arteries narrow and unhealthy. A clot is likely to form, slowing or blocking blood flow.

LDL cholesterol is a type of unhealthy cholesterol. When it gets high, it clogs the arteries.

HDL cholesterol protects against heart disease. It picks up excess cholesterol in the arteries and transports it back to the liver. The higher your HDL, the lower your health risk.

Triglycerides are a type of fat in your blood. When triglycerides get too high, they contribute to clogging of the arteries. This increases the likelihood of a stroke.

BMI - Body mass index is a measure of body fat based on height and weight. BMIs between 18.5 and 24.9 are considered normal. Too much body fat increases the risk of many health problems.

Waist size. You can have a healthy BMI and still be at risk for heart disease and diabetes if your waist size is large. Carrying too much fat around your

Diabetes

Blood Sugar
Your body uses carbohydrates in the food you eat to make glucose, a type of sugar. Glucose is your body's main energy source. When your body doesn't have enough insulin, your blood sugar level goes up. A high blood sugar level is harmful to your health. When blood sugar is high for a long time, you can lose your vision or the feeling in your feet and fingers. That feeling or numbness can be damaged. It's best to keep your blood sugar level below 100 mg/dL. Less than 100 is your target.

Weight
Have your blood sugar tested on a regular basis. This is important when you have risk factors for developing diabetes. These include being overweight, being inactive, and having a family history of diabetes, and having high blood fat.

Healthy Foods
Eat lots of fruits and vegetables. They have blood sugar levels healthy. Healthy foods like whole grains, whole wheat, soft drink, and blood sugar levels. Don't eat them.

Tobacco
Smoking and secondhand smoke raise your risk of diabetes. But any kind may be harmful - pipes, cigars, and electronic cigarettes. It's best to avoid all tobacco.

Physical Activity
Not being as active as a kid puts a big part in type 2 diabetes risk. Aim to do at least 150 minutes a week. Do things that make you breathe harder and your heart beat faster.

What to Eat

- Whole grains and other high-fiber foods
- Fats, lean meats, and poultry, fish, and eggs
- Fruits and vegetables (especially legumes)
- Healthy fats (nuts and vegetable oils)
- Low-glycemic index foods

Note: Low-glycemic index foods are low in starch or carbs, as well as sugar. Avoid refined grains, white rice, pasta, and sugary cereals. Instead choose whole grain bread, cereal, and pasta; brown rice; sweet potatoes; and oat-flavored oats.

Health Terms Used In Your Report

Overall Wellness Score is a quick view of how you're doing. It shows you are doing well. Less than that means it's time to make a change. Read through this guide. Decide what you want to do first. It will take time to form new healthy habits. But if you keep at it, your score will be higher next year.

Health Age is a measure of how old your body is compared to your actual age. It is based on health and lifestyle factors. You can be as young as 30 or as old as 60. Or you can have the health age of someone 30 years younger or 30 years older. You can lower your health age by making healthy choices.

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against your blood vessels. An optimal blood pressure is below 120/80. The first number is the pressure as your heart pumps blood through the vessels. This is called **systolic** pressure. The second number is the pressure when the vessels relax between heartbeats. It's called **diastolic** pressure.

Cholesterol is a kind of fat called lipids in the blood. It's healthy to have some cholesterol. But when you have too much, the lipids collect on artery walls. This can make your arteries narrow and unhealthy. A clot is likely to form, slowing or blocking blood flow.

LDL cholesterol is a type of unhealthy cholesterol. When it gets high, it clogs the arteries.

BMI - Body mass index is a measure of body fat based on height and weight. BMIs between 18.5 and 24.9 are considered normal. Too much body fat increases the risk of many health problems.

Waist size. You can have a healthy BMI and still be at risk for heart disease and diabetes if your waist size is large. Carrying too much fat around your



What Steps Can You Take?

1. Learn About Health Literacy:

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

2. **Read:** [Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion](#) by the Committee on Health Literacy at the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies.

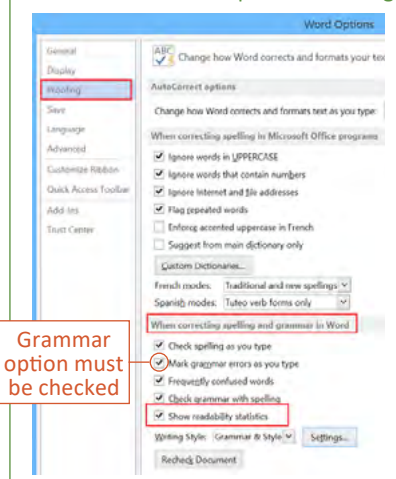
3. Score the Readability of Your Content:

If you use Microsoft® Word, you have a built-in readability program: Flesch-Kincaid. You can measure grade level as well as reading ease. If you are talking to consumers, aim for a reading ease score of 80.0 to 90.0, which is the equivalent of sixth grade.

Wellsource uses [The Health Literacy Advisor](#) to ensure participant-facing content is readable and understandable.

If you don't want to pay for a subscription, you can find free online graders, such as: [Readability Formulas](#) or [Readability Score](#).

Access the MS Word readability function under File: Options: Proofing



Grammar option must be checked

Accommodating Low Health Literacy Participants

Wellsource has kept health literacy in mind when developing our WellSuite® IV family of HRAs and self-management tools. WellSuite® IV HRA for Medicare and WellSuite IV HRA for Medicaid are written at an engaging and respectful fourth grade reading level.

The WellSuite IV HRA can be used to create a proactive disease prevention plan for individuals. Health plans and providers use the WellSuite IV HRA

for Medicare as a required component of the Annual Wellness Visit. The WellSuite IV HRA for Medicaid is used as a first step in patient engagement and care management. A companion to our WellSuite HRAs, WellSuite® IV HealthShelf® offers interactive health education with a collection of articles, quizzes, self-assessments, how-to guides, and recipes for healthy meals.

For more information on how you can provide health information and

products that are accessible to lower grade levels of health literacy, **contact Wellsource: well@wellsource.com or 800.533.9355.**

References:

1. 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/>
2. National Network of Libraries of Medicine. (n.d.). *Health Literacy*. Retrieved January 27, 2017, from <https://nnlm.gov/outreach/consumer/hlthlit.html>
3. *Journal of Health Communication*. (2013). *Low Health Literacy, Limited English Proficiency, and Health Status in Asians, Latinos, and Other Racial/Ethnic Groups in California*. Retrieved January 25, 2017 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3552496/>
4. Health Literacy Innovations, LLC. (2007). *National Survey of Medicaid Guidelines for Health Literacy*. Retrieved January 25, 2017 from <http://adph.org/ALPHTN/assets/060110survey.pdf>
5. U.S. Department of health and Human Services. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (n.d.). <https://health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsbasic.htm>