

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.

~ Healthy People 2010 & 2020



Health Literacy

Health messages are everywhere! Signs on the bus ask us to cover our nose and mouth when we sneeze. Health providers tell us to eat more fruits and vegetables. Teachers ask us not to send sugary drinks and snacks to school. Health insurers want us to quit smoking and be more active. Pro football players wear pink to remind women to be screened for breast cancer. Public Service Announcements remind us to get flu shots.

With so much health advice, how do families pick what's important? How do they fit one more thing into what they already do everyday, like prepare healthy snacks, or limit screen time? When families have children with special health needs, how do they know what advice applies to their child? And, how do they learn the skills they need to take care of their child's needs, like finding a physical therapist, giving medications, monitoring heart problems, taking apart a ventilator, or finding other resources and supports? Good health literacy skills make these tasks easier.

Health literacy is more just reading. It includes:

- How a person likes to get health information such as:
 - Written or verbal instructions
 - Pictures
 - Internet searches
 - Social media, such as Twitter or Facebook
- How well a person understands and uses the information to make decisions about:
 - Staying healthy
 - Preventing illness and injury
 - Health services and treatment options
- What a person does to stay healthy, for example:
 - Reads and understands directions for taking medicine
 - Knows how to describe symptoms or changes in health status



- Knows how to ask questions to clarify health advice

So, while health literacy is more than reading, reading is a key way to learn and improve health literacy.

Infancy: Talk to your baby. Respond to his or her smiles, coos and other sounds. Look at picture books, and talk about what you see.

Early Childhood: Read to your children. Ask them questions about the book. This will prompt your children to use their own words to describe events. When they are sick, they will be able to tell you what hurts.

Middle Childhood: Continue to read with your children. Let your child choose the books. Giving children choices helps them learn to make decisions. They will be able make choices about which healthy snack to eat, or which arm to use for a shot. Ask them if they have questions about what they read. This will help them learn to ask questions about health advice they get from health providers.

Adolescents: Talk about health messages teens read or hear. Ask what they think about the advice, and if and how they would make it part of their routines. Discuss how the life style choices they make today will affect their health when they are older. Healthy eating and physical activity are good ways to prevent unhealthy weight and the health problems it may cause. Many teens see health providers alone. Remind teens to ask questions and repeat back advice and instructions to be sure they understand the health advice they receive.

Special Health Needs: Children and youth with special health needs may have special routines, medical equipment and take medications to manage their health. When possible, include your child in discussions about health decisions. This will prepare him or her to make decisions when older. Teach your child how to explain his or her health condition. Have children read and explain medication labels, and demonstrate inhalers or other equipment to be sure they know how to use it.

Family Voices is a national network working to keep families at the center of children's health care. With an Improving Understanding of MCH grant, Family Voices works to encourage partnerships between families and professionals for children's good health. **Bright Futures: Family Matters** is a publication to share with your networks. Check out our Family Voices web sites at www.brightfuturesforfamilies.org and www.familyvoices.org.

Partners...



The members of the Association of State & Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) include:

- Public health agencies, such as state departments of public health,
- Public health professionals, and others

They work to reduce illness and injury. This helps improve public health and promotes overall health and wellness.

ASTHO is a membership organization. But, there is a lot of information for the public. Visit the Web site to learn about efforts to increase access to health services. Other topic areas include use of electronic health records, planning for emergencies, and ways to prevent injury and illness. The advocacy area of the site has fact sheets about health reform in each state. Also, there are publications about health equity, health reform, public health, and more.

Association of State & Territorial Health Officials

2231 Crystal Drive, Suite 450

Arlington, VA 22202

Phone: 202-371-9090

<http://www.astho.org/>

Family Resource Corner



This year is the 75th anniversary of Title V of the Social Security Act. Title V services are also called Maternal and Child Health (MCH) block grant programs. Every state has these programs. They promote the health of mothers and children, including children with special health needs. The goal of all Title V services is to improve the health, safety, and overall well-being of all children and families. Learn more about Title V at <http://bit.ly/TitleV>. Learn about Title V in your state at <http://bit.ly/StateTitleV>.

The Harvard School of Public Health has tips for writing easy to read text at <http://bit.ly/HarSPH>.

Read the three questions the National Patient Safety Foundation suggests you ask your health providers at <http://bit.ly/3quest>.

Do you know how to find services for a child or teen with special health needs? The Maternal and Child Health Bureau funds Family-to-Family Health Centers. Staff helps families learn about paying for health services, community supports, family/provider partnerships and more. Find the Center in your state at <http://bit.ly/F2FHICs>.

What's New in Research?



A teaspoon of sugar may “help the medicine go down.” But, if the patient needs to take the medicine on an empty stomach, it will not help, and may even be hurtful. Some people have a hard time understanding the right way to take medicine. Researchers from health literacy and learning programs and departments of medicine worked together to find ways to make it easier for patients to learn how to take medicine correctly. They studied 500 patients at four primary care sites. Patients received drug information three ways:

- 1) Standard drug warnings
- 2) Simple text warnings
- 3) Simple text with icons that patients helped create

Patients correctly understood only 9 standard drug warnings. Providing simpler text and icons was the best way to help patients with low literacy. Read more at <http://archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/170/1/50>.

Tidbits for the Month



Seasonal Flu - Every year, there is an outbreak of seasonal influenza (flu). The flu affects everyone differently. Some people get mildly ill. Others get very ill. Some people die. A yearly flu shot is the single most important way to prevent the flu. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention recommends a shot for everyone 6 months of age and older. It is also good to wash your hands often, with soap and warm water. And, cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze. Talk to your doctor about getting flu shots for your family. Learn more about flu prevention, and find a flu clinic at www.cdc.gov/flu.



Trick or Treat? The American Academy of Pediatrics wants your child to have happy Halloween. Learn about Halloween safety (English **en Español**), at www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/octhalloween.cfm.

Share your news!

Want to share news about your agency or family organization? Did you get this newsletter from someone else? We can add you to the mailing list. Let us know! Contact Betsy Anderson, IMPACT project director, at banderson@familyvoices.org.

Editor: Beth Dworetzky (bdworetzky@cox.net)