



Health literacy is how well patients are able to learn and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate decisions regarding their care.

Understanding medical issues and the healthcare system can be especially difficult for seniors. Many older adults struggle with age-related issues – such as failing eyesight, hearing loss and declining mental function – that can severely impact their ability to understand important information.

#### Create an Environment That Promotes Good Communication

- Schedule mid-morning appointments for senior patients, when their energy levels are likely to be higher.
- Allow for additional appointment time, especially when communicating new information to patients, such as test results or a new procedure.

#### When Speaking With Senior Patients...

- **Use words that are familiar.** Avoid medical jargon and acronyms – words or abbreviated words you use regularly as a medical professional can be confusing and unfamiliar to someone not in the medical field.
- **Listen for excuses when requesting to review health information** (e.g., “I forgot my glasses,” “I’ll read it when I get home.”)

Instead of saying...	Say...
This <i>medication</i> is to be taken twice a day.	Take this <i>pill/medicine/drug</i> twice a day.
Smoking has <i>adverse effects</i> on your health.	Smoking is <i>bad</i> for your health.
Are you sleeping <i>sufficiently</i> ?	Are you getting <i>enough</i> sleep?
Here is the urgent care center you can <i>utilize</i> .	Here is the urgent care center you can <i>use</i> .
Have you been <i>immunized against influenza</i> ?	Did you get a <i>flu shot</i> ?
It’s important to <i>adhere</i> to your treatment plan.	It’s important to <i>follow</i> your treatment plan.

An assessment tool for evaluating patients' health literacy level is the Newest Vital Sign and can be found at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1466931/figure/f1a](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1466931/figure/f1a). Be sure to review figures 1A and 1B.

# Office Staff Training

## Senior Patient Health Literacy (cont.)

- **Speak slowly and clearly.** Face and look at patients when talking or listening to them.
- **Simplify what you're saying by using a few key points and omitting unnecessary information.** Repeat these key points several times throughout your conversation. Avoid long phrases when a few simple words will do.

Instead of saying...	Say...
<i>At this point in time</i>	<i>Now or Today</i>
<i>In the event of</i>	<i>When</i>
<i>Due to the fact that</i>	<i>Because</i>
<i>On a daily basis</i>	<i>Every day or Daily</i>
<i>In the majority of instances</i>	<i>Generally or Most</i>

- **Give clear, specific instructions.** If there are multiple steps involved, explain the order and what to do and what to expect for each one.
- **Relate the message to patients' lives.** Explain information in terms of how it relates to patients' daily activities, social interactions and physical activity.

**Example:** *During her visit to the office, Mrs. Hernandez tells the medical assistant, Tim, that while she remembers every day to take her first pill when she wakes up and her last pill before she goes to bed, she has trouble remembering to take her other medications throughout the day. Knowing that she cares for her Cocker Spaniel at home, Tim suggests that she take the midday pill right before she goes on their daily walk.*

- **Use simple visual aids to promote understanding.** For example, demonstrate a new movement or exercise when appropriate and then encourage patients to practice it with you.
- **Check for understanding with the teach-back technique.** Don't assume patients comprehend the information provided. "Okay, let's have you tell me in your own words what we just talked about."
- **Suggest additional ways to enhance understanding.**
  - Encourage patients to invite a family member or trusted friend to appointments to assist patients with reading, providing information or clarifying instructions.
  - Suggest that patients keep any written instructions where they are visible and easily accessible, such as on the refrigerator or on a bedside table.

### Make Print Materials Easy to Read

- **Use large, bold print (12 point or larger).** Choose a clean, easy-to-read font.
- **Choose familiar words in short sentences.**
- **Include photos, graphics and other images when appropriate for demonstration and to reinforce messages.**

### Resource:

- Annals of Family Medicine newest vital sign: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1466931/figure/f1a](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1466931/figure/f1a)