

Health Literacy: The benefits of improving how we talk about, ask about, and understand our health

Health literacy is an essential part of health care. For example, good health literacy enables people to know why, how, and when to get preventive care, like screenings or vaccines, to understand dosage instructions, and to be aware of the adverse reactions that are associated with their medications. In contrast, poor health literacy can result in higher rates of hospitalization, more emergency department visits, and the inability to manage chronic conditions, like diabetes.

According to the National Institutes of Health, nearly 9 out of 10 adults in the U.S. struggle with health literacy, which is defined as “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.”¹

The complexities of the health care system also play a significant role in health literacy. For example, providers, clinicians, insurance companies, and other health services providers often use medical jargon rather than plain language.

Health literacy challenges are magnified by [Social determinants of health \(SDOH\)](#) create barriers to better health literacy. These factors – which include education, income, housing, transportation, discrimination, access to healthy food, and language and literacy skills – [play a variety of roles](#), from understanding a health care provider’s care instructions to knowing how to engage in their health benefits.²

Health literacy challenges can impact anyone – not simply those coping with SDOH challenges. According to the International Collegiate Journal of Science, 88% of U.S. adults have substandard rates of health literacy, with 14% lacking even basic knowledge, 22% having basic knowledge, and 55% having less than ideal knowledge of health information.³

Even people who have good reading comprehension and are good with numbers can face health literacy issues when they:

- Are unfamiliar with medical terms or how their bodies work.
- Need to interpret statistics and evaluate risks and benefits that affect their health and safety.
- Are scared and confused after being diagnosed with a serious illness.
- Have health conditions that require complicated self-care.⁴

Health literacy tools that serve many needs (and languages)

Reducing health literacy inequities requires a diverse toolbox to ensure that everyone can access the information they need in a way that works best for them, allowing them to overcome barriers created by language and culture, education level, word comprehension, image

comprehension, and more. For example, a patient with a limited English proficiency might have problems scheduling appointments or miss their appointments. During an appointment, the patient might be unable to communicate clearly with their doctor, which could potentially lead to adverse health situations, such as a misdiagnosis and unnecessary medications or treatments.

To help close these communication gaps, Cigna Healthcare offers a variety of language and accessibility services for people with limited English proficiency and/or disabilities. We can provide written translations of health- and benefit-related documents in more than 240 languages, including braille (which is also available on medication labels), and offer large print, alternative fonts, and audio options. [Interpreter services in those languages are available by phone 24/7.](#)⁵ In-person interpreters and virtual services are also accessible. those services, we also have unique tools that learn and draw from previous translations to help speed up future translations.

Equally important is “The Clinical Words We Use,” a continually updated tool for Cigna Healthcare clinicians, health coaches, and customer service people to help customers better understand their medical care instructions, medical benefits, and more.

Health literacy and a life-changing moment

These tools have real-world benefits for Cigna Healthcare’s patients. For example, a Spanish-speaking patient with limited proficiency in English was facing significant financial challenges resulting from her breast cancer treatments. A case manager from the Cigna Cancer Support Program referred her to an interpreter service. A Spanish-speaking interpreter provided resources that enabled the patient to connect with a social worker, who helped find resources and funding assistance for housing, utilities, food, and other necessities. In addition to discussing her financial issues, the patient told the interpreter that she had elevated blood sugar levels. As a result, Cigna Healthcare provided the patient with a glucometer and coaching support to help her follow her doctor's guidance.

Health literacy is more than just a single issue, like understanding medication directions and medical guidance or communicating a concern to a doctor or health care worker. Health literacy is integral to everyday health situations that may not be quite as obvious, like deciding which foods to eat, being able to follow a bus route to reach an appointment or caring for a family member. By improving health literacy and comprehension, and by using languages of choice, we can reduce health inequities.

To see more about how Cigna Healthcare is helping to address health literacy and accessibility, click [here](#).

Sources

1. Center for Health Care Strategies, "[Health Literacy Facts Sheets.](#)" March 2024.
2. CDC, "[Social Determinants of Health.](#)" February 2024.
3. International Collegiate Journal of Science, "[Health literacy in the United States.](#)" April 2022.
4. CDC, "[Understanding Health Literacy.](#)" May 2023.
5. Cigna Healthcare, "[Language Assistance and Interpreter Services.](#)" May 2024.

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