

Improving Health Literacy in Communities Guide to Ideas January 2010

What is Health Literacy? "Health literacy emerges when the expectations, preferences, and skills of individuals seeking health information and services meet the expectations, preferences, and skills of those providing information and services" (Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Health Literacy happens when health care professionals and patients:

- Are "on the same page" communicating and working together as a team
- Know each other's health care values and preferences
- Do their best to communicate with each other as clearly as possible to ensure understanding

Health Literacy can be supported by:

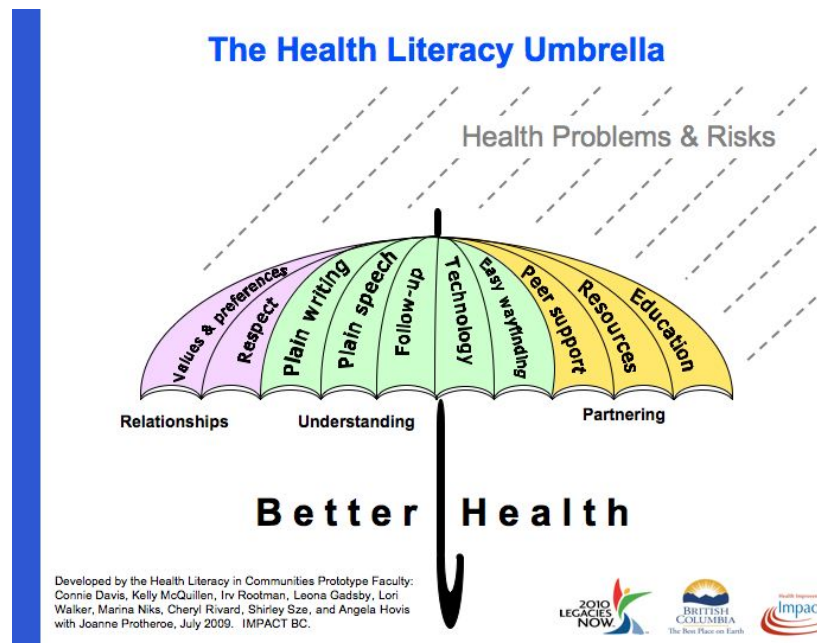
- Partnerships between health care professionals, patients and community agencies
- Training for health care professionals about clear and simple language, factors that affect understanding, and communication
- Information for patients about how to ask questions

Why is Health Literacy important?

- Health literacy leads to fewer health problems and safer care
- Patients and professionals feel good about the care they are giving and getting
- Patients become better at managing their own health
- Health care costs are reduced

This document tells how health literacy can be improved. There is more detail in the next pages.

We see health literacy as an umbrella that protects people from health problems and risks. When people are under the umbrella, they have better health. The health literacy umbrella has three areas and 10 sections. We have represented the areas by colours. They stand for three major strategies; Relationships, Understanding, and Partnering. The sections are 10 key changes that can be used to improve health literacy. Health care professionals, patients, and community groups can help build a good "health literacy umbrella to protect against a rain of health problems and risks".



Improving Health Literacy in Communities

Three Strategies and Ten Key Changes

Overview

Strategy 1. Relationships – Health care is ultimately about how patients and health care providers relate to each other and how they are able to plan together for patient care. Patients report better conversations with health care professionals when they feel relaxed and feel like the health care professional knows them. Health care professionals report more satisfaction in knowing their patients beyond their symptoms. Trust is very important in building relationships. **Two key changes** to build relationships are:

1. **Understand and consider values and preferences.**
2. **Make health care a relaxed, friendly and respectful experience.**

Strategy 2. Understanding – It requires work for patients and health care professionals to accurately share and process information in an interaction. How we communicate creates many opportunities for improving clarity and understanding. **Five key changes** to improve understanding are:

3. **Use plain everyday words and pictures that are clear and culturally relevant in written materials.**
4. **Use plain language when speaking and confirm understanding.**
5. **Follow-up after a new diagnosis or medication.**
6. **Use technology to access reliable information.**
7. **Make it easy to find your way in health care settings.**

Strategy 3. Partnering – Individuals and health care systems are part of community life. Community agencies and health care systems can work together to support better health for everyone. **Three key changes** to improve partnering are:

8. **Take advantage of peer support**
9. **Use accessible, supportive community resources**
10. **Participate in health literacy education**

Helpful Actions for the 3 Strategies and 10 Key Changes

Strategy 1: Relationships – Health care is ultimately about how patients and providers relate to each other and how they are able to plan together for patient care. Patients report better conversations with health care professionals when they feel relaxed and they feel like the health care professional knows them. Health care professionals report more satisfaction when they know their patients beyond their symptoms. Trust is very important in building a relationship.

Key Change 1. Understand and consider values and preferences

What can health care professionals do?

- Assess each patient's learning preferences, treatment preferences, culture, values, primary language, and beliefs before giving advice or making a plan with the patient.
- Plan for professional translators when needed.
- Match teaching approaches to learning styles. For example, use pictures for visual learners.
- Try to understand the environment in which a person lives by using a statement such as "Tell me a little bit about your work and day."
- Ask if patient wants to include family in the visit (especially seniors or people with chronic conditions).

What can patients and families do?

- Know if they prefer to learn by reading, hearing or seeing.
- Provide information about learning preferences, treatment preferences, culture, values, primary language and beliefs in health care conversations and ask for information to match their values and preferences.
- Ask for translation services.
- Tell health care professionals how their life influences their health.
- Include family or significant others in visits as they wish.

What can community groups do?

- Provide health care professionals with information about the community including cultural groups, languages, cultural competency education.
- Refer, provide or plan translation services; support translation in the healthcare setting.
- Refer patients to community resources that would be meaningful to them.
- Provide training to patients about how to communicate with the doctor and to understand the doctor's practice (time restrictions, for example).
- Provide support/training to family/significant others regarding how to support patients.

Key Change 2. Make health care a relaxed, friendly, and respectful experience

What can health care professionals do?

- Review phone or answering system for user-friendliness and privacy.
- Consider if physical environment is friendly welcoming and has easy to understand signs
- Greet patients warmly for visits.
- Give patients time to ask questions.

What can patients and families do?

- Understand how visits are organized and help plan the visit to meet the needs.
- Know their reason for the visit and what they want to ask ahead of time (ie. "Ask Me 3")
- Know importance of being on time for a visit and give as much notice as possible if need to cancel.
- Bring information that is requested or needed by the doctor.
- Have a more meaningful visit by completing all requested medical tests before the visit.

What can health care professionals, families and patients do together?

- Patients and providers can talk about a “visit agenda” at the beginning of the visit so they know how much time they have and understand what they wish to accomplish at the visit.

What can community groups do?

- Provide training about how to find doctors, and set up appointments.
- Provide or refer to child care resources.
- Provide information about or arrange for transportation to office visits.
- Train people about what to expect in a visit and what to bring to a doctor’s appointment
- Help patients understand the doctor’s need for information as well as the need for tests.
- Help patients form questions about tests and medical conditions ahead of appointments.
- Make it easier to find locations for medical tests.

Strategy 2: Understanding – It requires work for patients and health care professionals to accurately share and process information in an interaction. How we communicate creates many opportunities for improving clarity and understanding.

Key Change 3. Use plain everyday words and pictures that are clear and culturally relevant in written materials

What can health care professionals do?

- Assess the reading level difficulty of forms and written information.
- Avoid jargon and use plain language.
- Use pictures to describe conditions and clarify medication schedules.

What can patients and families do?

- Understand that asking questions about conditions and words is expected and is not rude.
- Tell the doctor or nurse if there is something you don’t understand.
- Ask the doctor to draw a picture about something that is not understood.

What can community groups do?

- Review and help design forms to make them easier to understand and user-friendly for different groups of people.
- Encourage clients to ask when they do not understand something in writing (for example, forms, brochures, or instructions).
- Provide training to health care professionals about plain language and clear communication.
- Provide or refer patients to appropriate health care materials from reliable sources.

Key Change 4. Use plain language when speaking and confirm understanding

What can health care professionals do?

- Use “Teach Back” (“Close the Loop”) and let questions be the answer: Ask “Could you tell me what you are going to do based on what we talked about so I know if I was clear?” rather than “do you understand?”
- Ask clarifying questions: “What do you understand about how your illness can affect your life?” “What medications are you currently taking?” “What is this pill for?” “How often do you take each pill? How many do you take at a time?” “Have you experienced any side effects that you think may be related to these medications?”
- Ask how the person is going to explain what happened at the doctor’s office to their family or a friend.
- Encourage patients to bring all of their medications to visits for review.

What can patients and families do?

- Think about the benefit you want from taking the medication, and if you will be able to take it as prescribed. Share any problems you might have with the health care professional.
- Ask for a written plan to manage chronic conditions.
- Tell back to the health care professional what you have heard in the conversation.
- Ask questions when something is not clear throughout the medical visit to understand drugs, side effects, lab tests, health condition, etc.
- If something is not clear ask the doctor or nurse to explain it again—maybe in a different way.

What can community groups do?

- Provide training for clients/patients about how to ask questions and how to ask for better explanations from health care professionals
- Provide support for clients to help them understand why and how to take medications and help them review doctor and pharmacy instructions.
- Help patients locate reliable helpful resources in the community.
- Ask patients if they get enough explanation from the pharmacy about medications and side effects and then work with pharmacies on ideas for improving.

Key Change 5. Follow-up after a new diagnosis or medication

What can health care professionals do?

- Assign a staff member who will follow up with patients.
- Create a system for follow-up. An information system such as tickler file or electronic record.
- Use a follow-up “check list” to help assess how new treatments are going, problem solving, and next steps.

What can patients and families do?

- Call health care professionals to let them know how a new treatment is working.
- Use a log to monitor how a new treatment is working and bring it to each visit.
- Use medication schedules or aids such as blister packs or pillboxes.

What can patients and health care professionals do together?

- Understand reason for follow-up and make a plan that includes what to track at home, and date, time, and method of follow-up such as a visit, call, or email.

What can community groups do?

- Encourage use of other reliable resources, when appropriate, such as internet sites or books (e.g. HealthLink BC)
- Provide opportunities to discuss how to follow-up with health care professionals about previous visits.
- Provide support, especially in literacy, seniors’ and English as a Second Language programs, for making and using a log to track symptoms or new behaviors.

Key Change 6. Use technology to access reliable information

What can health care professionals do?

- Encourage patients with computer skills to use computers for health information and refer them to reliable and appropriate internet sites.
- Have videos for explanations about health topics.

What can patients and families do?

- Find information on health conditions from reliable, recommended sources.
- Ask for, view, and discuss videos on health topics.

What can community groups do?

- Teach computer/internet use.
- Develop and/or identify culturally appropriate health-related videos.

Key Change 7. Make it easy to find your way in health care settings

What can health care professionals do?

- Make the first contact be barrier-free.
- Whether the phone system is automated or answered in person, provide clear directions to the clinic.
- Use customized and highlighted hand-held maps when referring people to other locations.
- Have office entry signs that are visible from the street and use plain language.
- Do a health literacy “Walkabout” or audit to understand barriers and then improve office signs, written materials and atmosphere.

What can patients and families do?

- Learn the best time to have appointments so that they are less likely to wait and more likely to have more time with the health care provider.
- Ask for and use maps and signs.

What can community groups do?

- Discuss what to expect in different kinds of doctor appointments (example: preventive or acute).
- Teach patients about how to find locations, including using the computer and asking for help.
- Provide maps that highlight health care offices, laboratories, pharmacies.
- Help evaluate and make improvements to office signs (e.g. Plain language and Health Literacy Audits).
- Advocate for patient-friendly health care settings.

Strategy 3: Partnering – Both individuals and health care systems are in a community. Community agencies and health care systems can work together to support better health for everyone.

Key Change 8. Take advantage of peer support

What can health care professionals do?

- Have information volunteers at the office.
- Refer patients to peer support groups or use group medical appointments where patients help each other set goals and problem-solve.
- Identify people who often get asked for health advice (such as beauticians or ministers) and make sure they have good health information.
- Refer patients to self-management education programs in your community such as BouncBack or Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions.

What can patients and families do?

- Use information volunteers in health care settings.
- Participate in peer-support groups or try a group medical visit.

What can community groups do?

- Use culturally specific peer trainers to communicate basic health information for their own cultures.
- Provide or host peer-support groups.

What can communities and patients and families do together?

- Contact local groups that have programs for training people to train others regarding health literacy.

- If there isn't a program to train people for health literacy, start one.

Key Change 9. Use accessible, supportive community resources

What can health care professionals do?

- Assess patients' needs for resources, such as transportation or finding a personal doctor.
- Keep a list of up-to-date community resources, know which ones are literacy-friendly, and know which ones are effective.

What can patients and families do?

- Let health care professionals or community groups know if help is needed.
- Let health care professionals and community groups know which resources are helpful and which ones are not and why.

What can community groups do?

- Provide specific and up-to-date contact information for community services, including transportation options.
- Help to identify trustworthy sources of health information.
- Refer people to community resources for health care, such as information telephone services, publications and websites. Identify and help to address any usability or access issues.

Key Change 10. Participate in health literacy education

What can health care professionals do?

- Help design or provide health examples as content for literacy programs.
- Provide health information (such as flu awareness or diabetes education) to community groups.
- Participate in creating and giving health literacy workshops/presentations in community.
- Learn more about adult literacy; visit adult literacy classrooms.

What can patients and families do?

- Support and participate in literacy programs.
- Participate in information/education programs.
- Participate in creating or giving health literacy workshops/presentations in the community.

What can community groups do?

- Use health topics in the literacy programs' curriculum.
- Provide/host education where people gather such as at senior's centres or church groups.
- Deliver health literacy content to literacy learner groups or community gatherings.
- Invite health care providers to visit/participate in adult literacy classes.

For more information, contact Impact BC info@impactbc.ca and visit us online:
[Impact BC | Patients as Partners - Resources for Regional Teams](#)