

HEALTH LITERACY: It Takes a Village



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OCTOBER 2019

October is Health Literacy Month!



Health Literacy

The degree to which individuals have the capacity to:

- obtain
 - process
 - understand

basic health information and services needed to
make appropriate health decisions

-Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion, IOM, 2004

Populations With Greater Likelihood of Lower Health Literacy:

- Immigrants
- Minorities
- Low income
- Low education level
- Limited English Proficiency (LEP)
- Elderly

The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006483.pdf>

Other Populations With Greater Likelihood of Lower Health Literacy:

- Learning Disabilities
 - Autism
 - Dyslexia
- Cognitive Disabilities

No one is exempt!

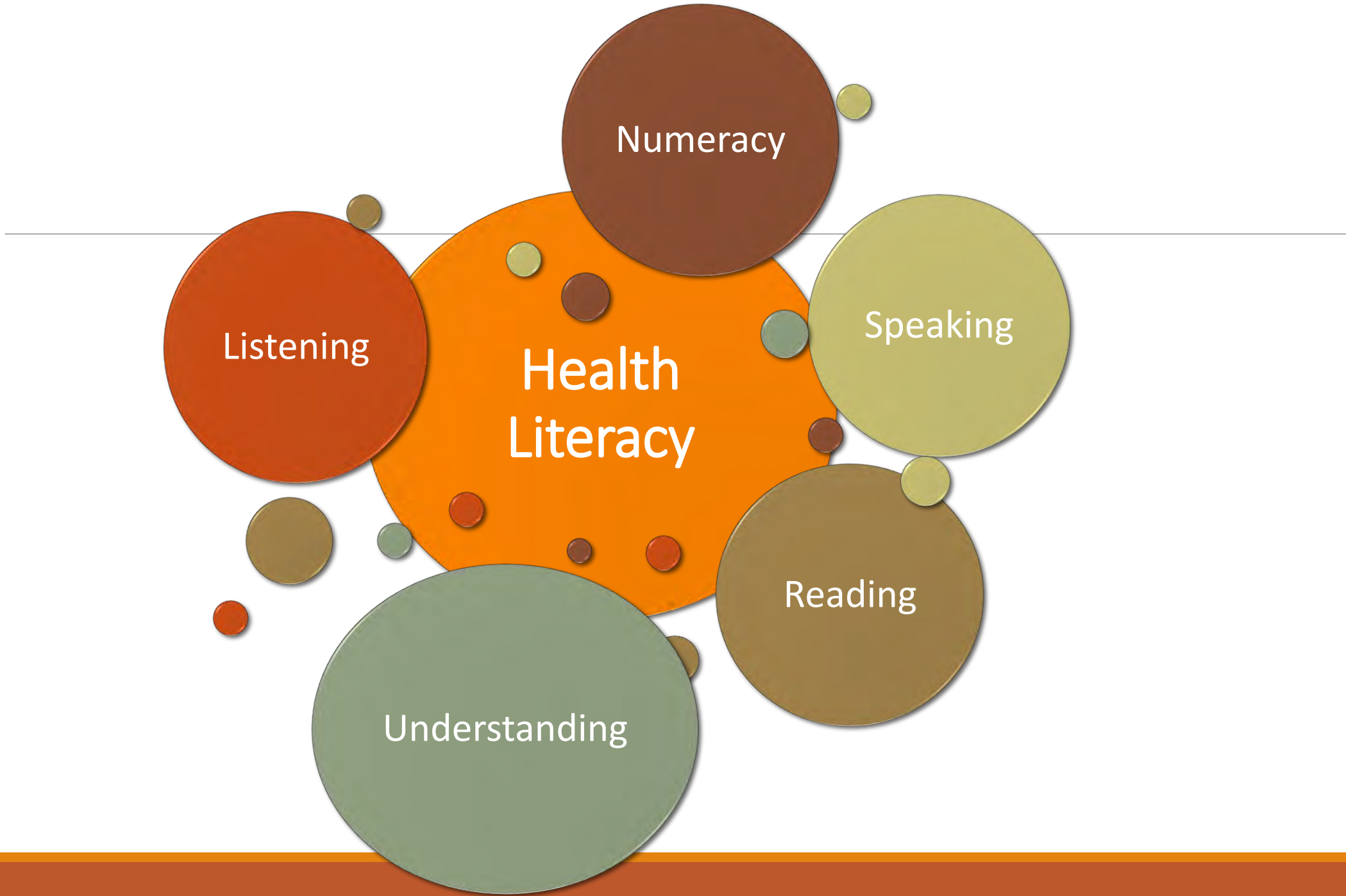
Even **YOU** can experience instances
where understanding & acting upon
medical information

or

navigating the healthcare systems is
challenging



Factors associated with low health literacy



Numeracy

Listening

Health
Literacy

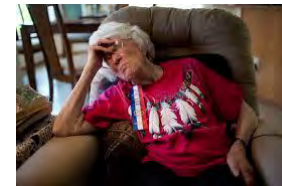
Speaking

Reading

Understanding

Factors That May Hinder Understanding:

- Intimidation, fear, vulnerability
- Shock upon hearing a diagnosis
- Extenuating stressors within the patient's family
- Multiple health conditions to understand and treat



Factors That May Hinder Understanding:

- **Medical Jargon:** The language of medicine adds to the degree of difficulty.

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Factors That May Hinder Understanding:

- Use of **numbers** (Numeracy): probability, risk
- **Unfamiliar symbols and abbreviations**
- **Reading level** of patient education materials/ discharge instructions medication labels, etc.

Factors That May Hinder Obtaining Basic Health Services

- Identifying healthcare services (challenge for the best of us)
- Forms: applications, insurance, consent forms
- Healthcare setting: maps, directories, signs posted, instructions, unfamiliar phrases
- Availability of personal computers/computer literacy

Implications of low health literacy

Patients with **low health literacy**
Less Likely to:

Seek help early in the course of a
disease

Engage in **self-care and chronic-**
disease management

Keep **appointments**

Share **personal health information**
accurately

Patients with **low health literacy**

Less Likely to:

Understand **mathematical concepts** such as probability and risk

Take **medications** properly

Understand **instructions** (discharge, test prep, etc.)

Navigate the healthcare system and setting



Impacts of Low Health Literacy

patients with low
HEALTH LITERACY...



Are more likely to visit an
EMERGENCY ROOM



Have more
HOSPITAL STAYS



Are less likely to follow
TREATMENT PLANS



Have higher
MORTALITY RATES

www.cdc.gov/phpr



Economic Impact: Higher Healthcare Costs

The cost of low health literacy to the U.S. economy is between \$106 billion to \$238 billion annually.



http://publichealth.gwu.edu/departments/healthpolicy/CHPR/downloads/LowHealthLiteracyReport10_4_07.pdf

Identifying persons with low health literacy

Overestimate what patients/clients/customers are able to read and understand

- Can't tell by appearance
- Number of years of schooling does not correlate with literacy skills
- Adults with low literacy skills are adept at hiding it

Red Flags

Incomplete or inaccurately completed forms

Frequently misses appointments

Taking medication incorrectly

“I forgot my glasses. I’ll read this when I get home.”

“Let me bring this home so I can discuss it with my children.”



BEST PRACTICES
FOR CLEAR HEALTH
COMMUNICATION



U.S. Literacy Facts

The average adult reads at an **eighth-grade** level

About 20% of adults read at the **fifth-grade** level and below (about 62 million)

The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006483.pdf>

U.S. Health Literacy Fact

Most health-related materials are written at **high school** reading level or higher



Three Essential Aspects of Clear Health Communication

- Know your “audience”
- Treat every person with respect
- Provide written materials in plain language

Worth Repeating

40-80% of medical information provided by healthcare practitioners is forgotten immediately.!

Source: J R Soc Med.2003 May; 96(5): 219–222.

Verbal & Written Recommendations

Plain Language – common words/short words

Short **sentences** = **15 words** or less

Avoid **polysyllabic** words *whenever possible*

Explain what is meant by **vague terms**

Written Recommendations

Use the second person—"**you**" or "**your child**"
(not "the patient")

Font: SIZE and type (~~Times New Roman~~)

Ample **white space**

Verbal Recommendation

Ask **open ended** questions

- How are you taking this medication?
- What are your symptoms?
- What kind of information about your care are you looking for?

Recommendations for Increasing Behavior Change

- Whose behavior are you trying to change?
- What do you want them to DO?
- Describe immediate benefits (what's it in for them)
- Check for understanding (teach-back method)

Other Factors Which May Contribute to Low Health Literacy : **Social Determinants of Health**

Conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes.¹



Adapted from: Healthy People 2020

Other Factors Which May Contribute to Low Health Literacy : Health Care Disparities

Typically refers to differences between groups related to:

- health insurance coverage
- access to and use of care
- quality of care

Other Factors Which May Contribute to Low Health Literacy : Culture/Belief Systems



Become a Health Literacy Advocate

- Form partnerships & collaborate to improve:
 - Programs /Services
 - Policies
 - Legislation
- Take an active role in asserting your right to receive health information in an understandable way

It takes a
VILLAGE



Health Literacy is everyone's business!



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Questions?

Comments?

Thoughts?



