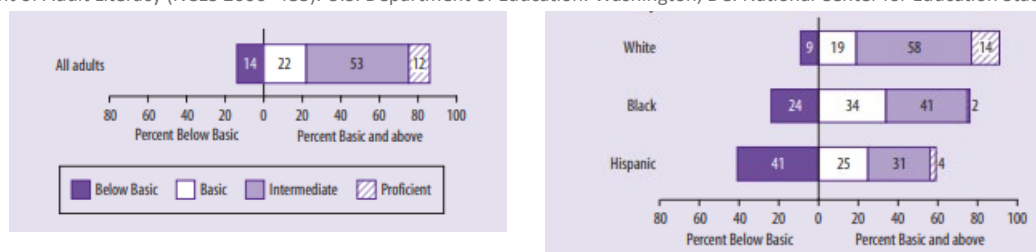


What is Health Literacy?

- Personal health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain and understand the health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.
- Health literacy skills include reading and writing, calculating numbers, communicating with health care professionals, and using health technology.
- Poor health literacy is a stronger predictor of a person's health than age, race, income, employment, or education. However, many patients do not disclose their low health literacy. Therefore, clinicians must develop skills to recognize this concern as well as strategies to accommodate to their patients' needs.
- Healthcare organizations hold a responsibility to deliver understandable information and services which enable their patients to make informed health-related decisions.
- Sixty percent of patients on Medicaid are reported to have below basic or basic health literacy.
 - Elderly patients, those with low education levels and limited English proficiency are risk groups.
 - Also at risk are those with intellectual or developmental disability (IDD), who are 2-5% of the US adult population.
- In total about 14% of U.S. adults report below basic health literacy (<http://nces.ed.gov/naal/health.asp>).

Percent of 2003 U.S. Adults with Below Basic, Basic, Intermediate or Proficient Health Literacy: Total & By Race

Source: Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., and Paulsen, C. (2006). The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006-483). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.



There are informal ways to identify low health literacy. Consider this issue in those who:

- Miss appointments frequently?
- Fail to complete or accurately complete registration forms?
- Identify pills by looking at them rather than reading their label?
- Struggle to provide a coherent, sequential medical history?
- Avoid following up on tests or referrals?
- Use statements like "I forgot my reading glasses" or "I'll read through this when I get home."

Formal literacy screening can be useful.

- A validated single item screener is: "How often do you need to have someone help you when you read written info from your doctor or pharmacy?"
- The REALM-R (Rapid Assessment of Adult Literacy in Medicine) measures reading of common medical words. Teen and Spanish versions are also available. (<https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/research/tools/index.html#rapid>)

Other ideas you may choose to explore:

- "How do you like to learn about your health? Some people prefer talking? Videos? Written info?"
- "Do you like to ask anyone in your life to help you with your healthcare? "
- "Did you receive any special help when you were in school?"

Take care to conduct assessments in a private, respectful manner.

Note: Some patients with IDD are identifiable by a syndrome, such as Down Syndrome. The majority are non-syndromic. Also note that only a subset of those with common neurophysical disabilities, such as cerebral palsy or spina bifida have associated IDD. The majority of persons with IDD can demonstrate reading levels between 2nd-6th grade. Many typical patient handouts exceed this level. You can estimate a 4th grade level has about 8-word sentences with an average of 1.3 syllables per word, typically using no 3-syllable words.

- A classic example is the Highlights for Children magazine.
- Use short, familiar words. Explain new words and concepts. Provide concrete examples.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms.



Reference: <https://www.chcs.org/resource/health-literacy-fact-sheets>

Summary by CYACC: April 2025

Center for Youth and Adults with Conditions of Childhood (CYACC)