

Health Literacy and Patient Education Materials

According to the National Adult Literacy Survey conducted in 2003, adults on average read 3-4 grade levels lower than the years of school they have completed. Despite the realization that literacy skills vary widely, we rely heavily in health care on written instructions and patient education materials. For example, we provide workbooks in diabetes classes, we provide brochures and flyers to market our programs; we pass out educational materials at health fairs, and post information on our website. But how health literacy friendly are the materials that we purchase or create? The Emory University school of Public Health supported by a grant from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality produced a manual called “*Clear and Effective Patient Education: A guide for Improving Health Communications in the Hospital Setting.*” This manual addresses a variety of issues around creating effective health education materials. These tips also apply to choosing materials that are health literacy friendly. Here are some highlights:

- Keep information specific and unambiguous.
- Information in brochures or handouts should be written with short, specific and direct sentences.
- Limit content to what patients really need to know
- Sequence information logically in an easy to follow manner.
- Present key information first and/or last (people tend to remember what they read first and last
- Avoid text that is in all caps.
- Limit the number of fonts and their variations
- Type size should be as large as possible, at least 12 point. 14-16 is preferred.
- Use simple, common words that are familiar to your readers
- Use appropriate pictures, illustrations and graphics in conjunction with words
- Graphics that focus on the action patients should take are most helpful.
- Use one or two syllable words
- Use short paragraphs
- Avoid all but the most simple tables and graphs.
- Ensure a good amount of empty space on the page
- Use headings and subheadings to separate blocks of text
- Bulleted lists are preferable to blocks of text in paragraphs
- Keep reading level at or below the 6th grade level

For more information on health literacy and health education materials, try these resources:

Clear and Effective Patient Education; A Guide for Improving Health Communications in the Hospital Setting (kljacob@sph.emory.edu)

Making Health Communication Program Work. A joint publication of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, and the National Cancer Institute.

Pfizer Principles for Clear Communication

Gaston N, Daniels P. Guidelines: *Writing for Adults with Limited Reading Skills.* Alexandria, VA. United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Information: 1988. NAL Call No.: APE1126 A4G8