

## Introduction

To successfully manage their health, people must be able “to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”<sup>1</sup> Known as health literacy, this ability involves using reading, writing, verbal, and numerical skills in the context of health.<sup>1</sup> Being health literate, however, also depends on the complexity of the health information given to patients and the tasks they are asked to perform. A national survey showed that 88% of U.S. adults do not have the health literacy skills needed to manage all the demands of the current health care system and 36% have limited health literacy.<sup>2</sup>

Research shows that clinicians have trouble identifying patients with limited health literacy.<sup>3-6</sup> Although some groups have higher rates of health literacy limitations, such as some racial/ethnic minority and older populations, limited health literacy is seen in all sociodemographic groups.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, managing one’s health can be more challenging in times of stress. When patients or caregivers are anxious or overwhelmed with too much information, their ability to absorb, recall, and use health information can decline,<sup>7</sup> compromising their ability to manage their health.

### What Are Health Literacy Universal Precautions?

Because limited health literacy is common and is hard to recognize, experts recommend using health literacy universal precautions. Practices should assume that all patients and caregivers may have difficulty comprehending health information and should communicate in ways that anyone can understand. Health literacy universal precautions are aimed at—

- simplifying communication with and confirming comprehension for all patients, so that the risk of miscommunication is minimized<sup>8</sup>
- making the office environment and health care system easier to navigate
- supporting patients’ efforts to improve their health

Everyone gains from health literacy universal precautions. Research shows that interventions designed for people with limited health literacy also benefit those with stronger health literacy skills.<sup>9,10</sup>

Communicating clearly helps people feel more involved in their health care and increases the chances of following through on their treatment plans.<sup>9</sup> All patients appreciate receiving information that is clear and easy to act on.

### Why a Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit?

The purpose of this Toolkit is to provide evidence-based guidance to support primary care practices in addressing health literacy. The Toolkit can help practices reduce the complexity of health care, increase patient understanding of health information, and enhance support for patients of all literacy levels.

The Toolkit comprises 21 tools addressing 4 domains that are important for promoting health literacy in your practice:

1. Spoken Communication
2. Written Communication
3. Self-Management and Empowerment
4. Supportive Systems

The Toolkit appendix contains over 30 resources, such as sample forms, PowerPoint presentations, and worksheets that practices may use or revise to suit their needs. For a complete list of tools and appendices, go to the Table of Contents.

In addition, AHRQ has created a companion guide with concrete advice based on the implementation experiences of diverse primary care practices. At least one person—such as a practice facilitator, quality improvement specialist, or health literacy team leader—should read, “Implementing the AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit: Practical Ideas for Primary Care Practices” before you get started.

## **What is the Evidence for a Focus on Health Literacy?**

Individuals with limited health literacy experience a variety of negative outcomes. They have more restricted knowledge of their health problems, make more errors taking medicine, use more inpatient and emergency department care, receive fewer preventive services, and have worse health status and higher health care costs.<sup>11-14</sup>

Fortunately, primary care practices can enhance outcomes for their patients by addressing health literacy in their office environments and clinical procedures. Addressing health literacy is associated with improved health outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Below are a few illustrative research studies showing how good health literacy practices can improve specific health behaviors and outcomes for patients.

- **Colon Cancer Screening:** This study shows how teaching clinicians to communicate more effectively can increase participation in colon cancer screening.<sup>16</sup>
- **Depression Management:** This study shows that, when low-literate patients with depression were referred to literacy programs, their symptoms significantly improved compared to control participants, who just received depression treatment.<sup>17</sup>
- **Diabetes and Heart Failure Management:** These studies show that, when patients receive self-management education using effective communication techniques, diabetes and heart failure control are improved.<sup>9,18-20</sup>

## How Can Addressing Health Literacy Support Your Practice Goals?

Addressing health literacy in your practice can serve both your patients' needs and your practice's other goals. Many of the action steps recommended in this Toolkit are consistent with and may help qualify your practice for certification as a patient-centered medical home (PCMH). Linking the implementation of the health literacy tools to your practice's other quality improvement activities and/or PCMH-related efforts can help increase staff buy-in as well as the efficiency and "pay-off" of your work.

This link takes you to a Crosswalk that presents the linkages between the tools included in the Toolkit and the PCMH certification standards (as of 2014) of the following three major accrediting organizations:

- The National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA)
- The Joint Commission
- The Utilization Review Accreditation Committee (URAC)

The Crosswalk is provided as a resource to help primary care practices identify tools that are relevant to specific certification standards. Implementation of these tools may contribute to your efforts to attain PCMH certification. However, we cannot guarantee that implementation of a given tool will result in a practice successfully meeting a given certification standard. It is also important to note that accreditation standards are updated frequently. Check the most recent PCMH standards to ensure you have the latest guidelines.

Addressing health literacy is important to achieve patient safety goals. Both the AMA and The Joint Commission have provided guidance on improving health literacy to improve patient safety.<sup>22,23</sup>

Implementation of specific tools in this Toolkit also may support practices and clinicians in their efforts related to Maintenance of Certification and Meaningful Use. To make the most of their quality improvement work, we encourage practices to consider how their health literacy-related efforts can also address these other goals.

## Who Should Use this Toolkit?

This Toolkit is designed to be used in any primary care setting, although some tools are applicable to other settings as well. The Toolkit can help practices with little or no experience addressing health literacy as well as those that are already engaged in health literacy-related quality improvement work. With an extensive set of tools to choose from, even practices with substantial health literacy experience can benefit from this Toolkit.

## Can Your Practice Improve Its Health Literacy Environment?

Yes! This Toolkit has been tested in primary care practices and community clinics. Participating facilities showed that they could make changes to improve the way they communicate with and support their patients.

Just like these practices, your practice can benefit from this resource. The Toolkit can guide you in addressing health literacy limitations among your patients and help you to achieve your practice's other goals.

### Getting Started

To get started, we recommend that you begin by implementing Tools 1 through 3. These Tools will help you establish the foundation you need to successfully implement health literacy-related quality improvement efforts in your practice.

- Tool 1: Form a Team provides guidance on developing a team to lead your health literacy efforts.
- Tool 2: Create a Health Literacy Improvement Plan will guide you in assessing your practice and identifying areas to target in your quality improvement efforts.
- Tool 3: Raise Awareness provides guidance on resources for educating your staff about health literacy.

For those practices that want to jump right in and try a tool, see the Quick Start Guide, a one-page guide that will help you get started.

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