

HEALTH LITERACY

Universal Precautions Toolkit



*20 Step-by-Step Tools You Can Use to Help Increase
Patients' Understanding of Health Information*

What Is the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit?



The Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit is a set of step-by-step guides and tools that you and your health care team can use to minimize the risk that your patients will misremember or misinterpret important information about their diagnosis, treatment, or medication.

The toolkit contains 20 tools that you can easily incorporate into your practice's day-to-day activities. Each tool is designed to increase your patients' understanding of medical information and thus their ability to make informed health care decisions.¹ The toolkit was commissioned by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and developed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Why Use the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit?

All patients can misremember or misinterpret their doctor's communication, regardless of the patient's age, race, occupation, or education.² Even patients with higher than average health literacy levels can have trouble understanding medical information as the concepts become more complex.³ It's also difficult for health care providers to determine whether their patients truly or fully understood the information they received.^{1,2}

You can use the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit to structure your services and patient interactions in ways that can help minimize confusion. By managing and ultimately reducing the complexity of your patients' health care experience, you can help ensure that patients can succeed in the health care environment.¹⁻³

How Does Low Health Literacy Affect Patients?

Health literacy has implications on patient safety and patient self-management. Low health literacy levels affect a patient's ability to access health care services, understand important medical information, and follow health care instructions.¹

Tools to Achieve the 4 Key Drivers for Improving Health Literacy

The Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit contains a variety of tools that your practice can use to achieve the 4 key drivers necessary to improve health literacy.¹ These tools can help you:



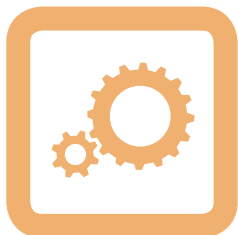
1. Improve verbal communication

Make sure everyone on your team is speaking in ways that your patients can understand. You'll get tips on how to produce effective verbal communication, including how to listen thoughtfully and speak clearly during face-to-face and phone conversations, how to address language barrier issues, and how to avoid miscommunication in cross-cultural situations.



2. Improve written communication

Patients' reading abilities are often below the readability of the material they're asked to read, watch, or fill out in their doctor's office. The toolkit offers advice on how to design user-friendly handouts, forms, and questionnaires; how to review educational materials with patients; and how to select visual aids that create a welcoming and helpful atmosphere in your office.



3. Improve self-management and empowerment

Patients are sometimes ashamed to ask questions, which could lead to misunderstandings, mistakes, and patients' difficulty in doing what's necessary to maintain their health and manage their health conditions. You can browse the toolkit for tips on how to encourage your patients to ask questions and become more involved in their health care.



4. Improve support systems

Patients with low health literacy might also be struggling with other aspects of their lives that can affect their health — things like understanding their health benefits, obtaining their medication, and addressing housing and transportation issues. The toolkit will show you how to connect your patients with other support systems that may improve their health outcomes.

How to Use the Toolkit

It's easy to get started with the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit. Just assemble your team, identify aspects of your practice that need improvement, and apply and assess your first tool.

Step 1 Assemble your team¹

Get support from senior leadership: When implementing systemic changes in your organization, it's important to involve senior leaders who can provide and direct key resources.

Engage your entire practice: Involve staff members at every level. Everyone on your health care team must commit to improving the health literacy of your patients.

Create a guiding coalition: You'll require leadership and a clear strategy. Appoint a chair or champion to lead the effort and include a representative from each department.

Establish a sense of urgency: Refer to the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit for tips on how to educate your staff on the importance of health literacy.

Step 2 Measure your practice's health literacy levels

The toolkit includes a questionnaire that you can use to measure your practice's health literacy levels in as little as 30 minutes. Your answers will give you an idea of what aspects of your practice you'll need to work on. You'll then be directed to specific tools in the toolkit that can help you address the issues you're facing.¹

Step 3 Apply and assess your first tool

Select a problem area and a tool that's designed to improve it. Try the tool on one patient or one member of your health care team and take note of the result. Then, try another tool. Starting with small tests will allow you to implement an effective long-term plan for enacting change in your practice.¹



Any Questions?

To learn more about the Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit and how your practice can use it to improve patient outcomes, please:

- Type <http://ahrq.gov/qual/literacy> into your web browser to download a PDF copy of the toolkit
- Type <https://www.merckconnect.com/professional-library/webcasts.html> into your web browser to watch a video developed by Merck titled, *Implementing Universal Precautions (Ensuring Clear Communication and Patient Understanding)*

References: 1. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. ahrq.gov/qual/literacy. Accessed October 22, 2014. 2. Kutner M, Greenberg E, Jin Y, et al. *The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2006–483). US Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. 3. Nielsen-Bohlman L, Panzer AM, Kindig DA, eds. *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*. Institute of Medicine. Washington DC: The National Academies Press; 2004.