



HEALTH POLICY ISSUE BRIEF

Health Literacy

This health policy issue brief helps family physicians and their care teams address health disparities related to health literacy issues among their patient populations and communities. It is an American Academy of Family Physicians policy priority to address the social determinants of health, including health literacy. The Academy recognizes that health literacy can impact people's health in many facets of health care. AAFP resources are available to support family physicians in creating a practice culture that values health equity by addressing implicit bias using cultural proficiency and health literacy standards.

Key Messages

- Culturally and linguistically appropriate services are essential for patient safety and adherence.¹
- Health literacy is a product of both individual skills and the complex literacy demands required to navigate the health care system.²
- Seventy-seven million adults have basic or below basic personal health literacy.²
- Addressing health literacy requires systems-level changes across the health care team, health systems and hospitals, written materials and numeric information.

A PATHWAY TO HEALTH EQUITY

Shared decision-making is essential to providing effective care and encouraging patient autonomy. Family physicians encounter patients and families from diverse backgrounds who bring their culture, values, ethics and preferences about their health care, especially when weighing risks, benefits and treatment options. Culture encompasses patterns of thought, communications, actions, beliefs, values and institutions associated with different groups, with cultural sensitivity as an essential element for patient safety and adherence.¹ As leaders in health care organizations, family physicians are critical voices for health equity by advocating for patients' preferences for their care and workplaces to promote health literacy.

*"Organizational health literacy is the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand and use information or services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others."*³ Health literate organizations intentionally build relationships and communication strategies to support planning, patient safety and quality improvement. They meet the needs of people with all levels of health literacy skills and avoid stigmatizing them; confirm understanding of health information at all points of contact; and provide easy access to health information, services and assistance to navigate them.⁴

Although it is often defined as an individual trait, health literacy in practice is a product of both individual skills and the complex literacy demands required to navigate the health care system.^{2,4} Physicians and their care teams should avoid making assumptions about someone's level of health literacy because assumptions can reinforce bias against minoritized groups.

Personal health literacy is a range of skills, including a person's ability to find, understand and use information or services to make informed health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others,³ including reading, writing, numeracy, communication, problem-solving, critical analysis and increasingly, a person's ability to use electronic technology.⁵

In the United States, 77 million adults have basic or below basic health literacy.² Even people with high overall literacy can struggle to understand the complexities of health information and services, creating a 'hidden population' of patients who struggle to adequately understand their health conditions.⁶ Their difficulties are less evident and less likely to be recognized or addressed by physicians and other health care providers compared to patients with cognitive difficulties or language barriers. However, while a basic lack of health literacy compounds health disparities among all patients, people who find reading, writing and numeracy challenging often face additional barriers to accessing health care, education and employment.

STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING HEALTH LITERACY

Patients receive information from many sources as they navigate their health care, including websites, on-site signage, intake forms, verbal instructions from the health care team, discharge summaries

The AAFP's [implicit bias resources](#), including its [Implicit Bias Training Guide](#), are tools family physicians can use to promote awareness of implicit bias in clinical settings to reduce the harmful effect of bias in patient care.