



## Making Your Practice Health Literacy Friendly for All Patients

Primary care practices can take action to decrease the complexity of the healthcare environment and to make health information and instructions easier to understand and act on. 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” – these skills are known as “health literacy.” A national survey showed that 36% of U.S. adults lack the health literacy skills needed to manage the demands of the current health care system. In times of stress, even people who normally have strong health literacy skills can have trouble understanding and using health information. And, research shows that it is difficult for clinicians to identify patients who are struggling to understand.

### What Are Health Literacy Universal Precautions?

Because limited health literacy is common and limitations are hard to recognize, experts recommend the use of health literacy universal precautions. Health literacy universal precautions are aimed at:

- simplifying communication and confirming comprehension for all patients, so that the risk of miscommunication is minimized,
- making the practice environment and health care system easier to navigate, and
- supporting patients’ efforts to improve their health.

Everyone gains from health literacy universal precautions; interventions designed for people with limited health literacy also benefit those with stronger health literacy skills. All patients appreciate when information is clear and easy to act on.

### What is the AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit?

The AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit was developed to help primary care practices adopt health literacy universal precautions. The Toolkit provides step-by-step guidance to help practices improve communication and support for patients of all health literacy levels. The Toolkit contains 21 tools focusing on four key goals:

1. improving spoken communication with patients,
2. improving written communication with patients,
3. supporting patient self-management and empowerment, and
4. developing supportive systems to connect patients to resources in the community.

## **How has the Toolkit been used by primary care practices?**

The Toolkit has been tested in a diverse array of primary care settings. Participating practices used the Toolkit to make important changes to support the needs of patients of all health literacy levels. For example:

- Practices implemented the self-assessment process recommended in the Toolkit. They found the results to be eye-opening and valuable in helping them to identify specific areas to target in their health literacy-related quality improvement efforts.
- The Toolkit supported practices in raising staff awareness of health literacy, why it is important, and recommended strategies for addressing health literacy in clinical practice.
- Practices implemented strategies for communicating more effectively with patients. They learned to speak more clearly, to confirm patient comprehension, and to encourage patient questions.
- Practices successfully implemented strategies to improve the value of medication reviews. Many practices were surprised at the number of patients for whom medication regimens were in error and needed to be revised.
- Practices discovered that their written patient materials were often too complex and used guidance from the Toolkit to revise or develop new written materials that would be more suitable for their patients.

## **How can the Toolkit help you?**

Using the Toolkit to identify and address areas for improvement can help you enhance communication and support for your patients. Addressing health literacy also can serve your practice's other goals. For instance, many of the action steps recommended in the Toolkit are consistent with and may help a practice meet requirements for becoming a Patient-Centered Medical Home. Implementation of specific tools may also support practices in their efforts related to Maintenance of Certification and Meaningful Use.

## **Where is the Toolkit located?**

To support the efforts of primary care practices seeking to address health literacy, AHRQ has made the Toolkit publically available. At the link below, you will find the Toolkit as well as its companion implementation guide, which provides further assistance to help you make meaningful changes to your practice's health literacy environment.

[\*\*AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit\*\*](#)