

# Universal health literacy precautions recommended

20 July 2015



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National data indicate that more than one-third of U.S. adults have limited health literacy, which can contribute to poor [health outcomes](#) and affect patient safety and [health care access](#) and quality. With this in mind, Lauren Hersh, M.D., from Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, and colleagues discuss ways to improve health literacy.

The authors note that routinely screening patients for health literacy has not been shown to improve outcomes. To provide understandable and accessible information to all patients, regardless of their literacy or education levels, multiple professional organizations have recommended use of universal health literacy precautions. These include avoiding medical jargon; breaking down information into small steps; restricting the focus of a visit to three key issues; and evaluating comprehension. The level of printed materials

should be at or below a fifth-to-sixth grade reading level. Patient understanding can be enhanced by visual aids, graphs, or pictures, as well as more concrete presentation of numerical information.

"Numerous policy and advocacy organizations have recognized the negative effects of limited health literacy on patient safety and the quality of [health care](#)," the authors write. "As a result, [health literacy](#) has evolved from a poorly recognized 'silent epidemic' to a major issue in health policy and reform."

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APA citation: Universal health literacy precautions recommended (2015, July 20) retrieved 1 November 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-07-universal-health-literacy-precautions.html>

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