

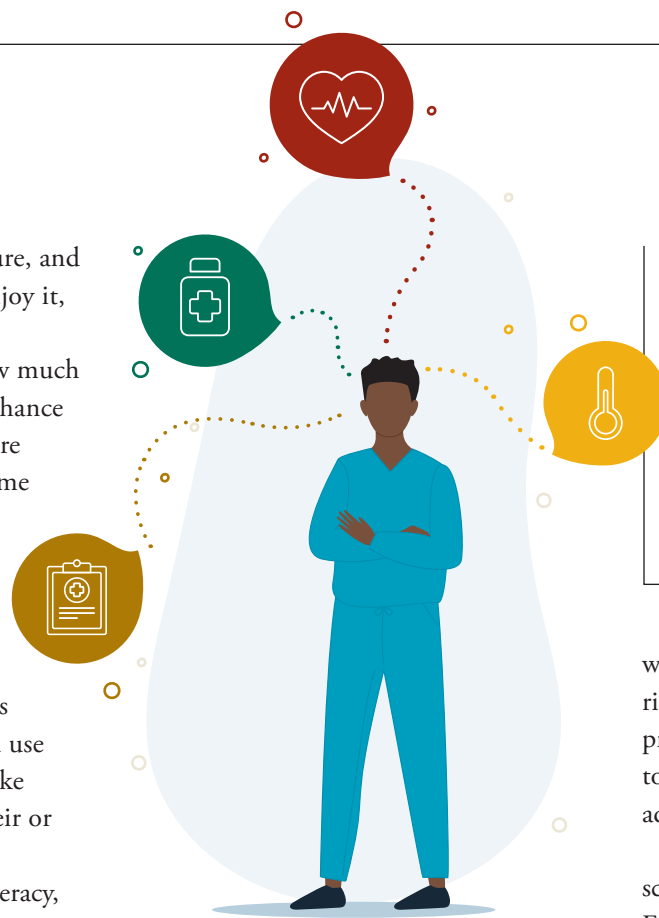
Reading can bring trials, pleasure, and even be life-changing. Some enjoy it, and others avoid it.

But if more people knew how much reading could tremendously enhance their lives, would they read more often? Health literacy has become more of a focus within health care because it empowers patients to manage their own health. Attaining health literacy, a concept that's been around for decades, allows people to gain, understand and use basic health information to make an informed decision about their or another person's health.

When patients have health literacy, their overall health tends to improve. But those who are not health literate are prone to poorer health behaviors and, ultimately, poorer health outcomes.

The elderly, people of low socioeconomic status, minorities and those who are medically underserved are at greatest risk and often have a low level of health literacy. The process of incorporating health literacy into a health plan often involves families, communities, health systems and, of course, the patient.

Health literacy includes knowing what medications to take and when, how and when to contact someone for help, how to engage in self-care. It also includes knowledge of medical conditions and what caused them, understanding the purpose of health screening questions and how that information is used, what risk factors are indicated for medical conditions and, of late, knowing and understanding the reasoning behind



recommended vaccinations, such as those formulated to fight COVID-19.

Nurses and health care providers must assess and proactively address any literary difficulty a patient may have regarding health care and ensure that patients are well equipped with the skills to interpret and source out health information. These skills will help people to effectively engage in long-term positive self-care practices, such as daily exercise to reduce the risk of heart disease. Health literacy also helps patients make informed decisions about lifestyle practices, such as appropriate alcohol consumption. It can raise their awareness of depressive or anxiety-related symptoms before they become a problem.

When people are not equipped with health literacy, they tend to participate in practices that result in poor health outcomes, such as a sedentary lifestyle,

HEALTH LITERACY A BIG CHALLENGE FOR MANY PATIENTS

BY TONISHA MELVIN

with high instances of hospitalizations, risky behaviors and lack of self-care practices. Health-literate patients tend to do much better, proving the old adage that knowledge is power.

Health care providers can use screening tools, such as the Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine or the Wide Range Achievement Test, to help determine a patient's degree of health literacy. By avoiding the use of medical jargon and remembering that much of the U.S. population has no more than a fifth-grade reading level, health care providers can help bridge the literacy gap and make sure that quality care is available to everyone.



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