Health Literacy Indicators for a Comprehensive Medication Review

Health literacy relates to the ability to **UNDERSTAND** and **ACT** on health information. While “red flags” are identified below, the best way to determine whether an individual would benefit from a Comprehensive Medication Review is by using the “Teach-Back” or “Show Me” technique with every patient. Following the use of the Teach-Back Method, patients qualify for a Comprehensive Medication Review if they demonstrate one or more of the following barriers:

### Patient Expresses a Barrier to UNDERSTANDING Health Information:

Based on the pharmacist’s professional judgment, the patient does not understand crucial information related to his or her medication regimen following the use of Teach-Back.

The following are events that may indicate the patient has barriers to UNDERSTANDING health information:

- Patient cannot express what each of their medications is generally used for.
- Patient is familiar with personal medication(s) by color only/does not know what each of their medications is generally used for.
- Patient cannot describe or demonstrate how each medication is taken (using the label as a prompt), including correct dosage and time of day.
- Patient expresses a “red flag” for low literacy such as:
  - Incomplete forms
  - Frequently missed appointments
  - Delay tactics: “I forgot my glasses,” “I’ll read this later,” “I don’t have time to wait today,” “Let me bring this home so I can discuss it with my spouse”
  - Needs help understanding
  - Patient requires the use of a qualified interpreter or translator

### Patient Expresses a Barrier to ACTING ON Health Information:

Based on the pharmacist’s professional judgment, the patient does not know how to take his or her medication(s) correctly after Teach-Back has been implemented.

The following are events that may indicate the patient has barriers to ACTING ON health information:

- Patient is unable to demonstrate how and when to take prescribed medication(s).
- Patient is unable to demonstrate pill counts.
- Patient has persistent adherence problems.
- Patient has not finished a complete round of prescribed medications at any time.
- Patient is currently outside of healthy range for indicators of the disease/condition for which patient is taking prescription medication.
- Patient has kept out of date or unused medications for possible future use.
- Patient takes medication(s) obtained from another country.
- Patient is unable to demonstrate how to take prescribed medication(s) correctly after Teach-Back has been implemented.

### Additional Resources

**Wisconsin Health Literacy**

- Comprehensive information and resources on health literacy and services available through Wisconsin Health Literacy, links to pharmacy tools, health literacy screening information, plain language glossaries and more. For information, email: healthliteracy@wisconsinliteracy.org
- Telephone Reminder Tool to Help Refill Medicines On Time
- Guide on How to Create a Pill Card
- Training Program for Pharmacy Staff on Communication

**Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)**

- Health Literacy Resources for Pharmacists
- AHRQ has developed five health literacy tools for pharmacy and a set of curricular tools for pharmacy faculty.

**Health Literacy Tools**

- Pharmacy Health Literacy Assessment Tool & User’s Guide
- Training Program for Pharmacy Staff on Communication
- Guide on How To Create a Pill Card
- Telephone Reminder Tool to Help Refill Medicines On Time
- Explicit and Standardized Prescription Medicine Instructions
- Curriculum Modules for Faculty

- Advancing Pharmacy Health Literacy Practices through Quality Improvement Curricular Modules for Faculty

**Available at AHRQ Pharmacy Health Literacy Center**


**POCKET BOOK TOOLKIT**

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

- Free training about health literacy for public health professionals. CPE credits available for pharmacists. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/gettraining.html

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

- Quick Guide to Health Literacy Available at http://health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide
Medication use is a special challenge for those with low health literacy. They may have difficulty:

- Understanding when and how to take medicine
- Interpreting informed consent documents
- Following medical test instructions
- Understanding what to do when discharged from the hospital
- Reading health education materials
- Completing health insurance forms

How can you tell if someone has low health literacy?

Nearly four of every ten adults have low health literacy—skills below what they need to understand typical medication information. Groups especially likely to have low health literacy include:

- Adults age 65 and older
- Ethnic minorities
- Adults with limited English language skills
- Homeless
- Prisoners
- Persons with limited education

Everyone has low health literacy at times. For example, it may be hard for a person to understand complicated instructions or health information when feeling sick, under stress or taking certain medications.

Can you screen for health literacy?

It’s best to take the Universal Precautions approach. Assume all patients may have difficulty understanding. Simply communicate and confirm comprehension with every patient. At times it may be helpful to verify if a patient has low health literacy so you can tailor a medication plan. In those situations, one question is a strong predictor of health literacy so you can tailor a medication plan. In those situations, one question is a strong predictor of health literacy:

“Do you have trouble hearing or understanding what doctors, nurses or other health care providers tell you?”

Use the Pharmacy Health Literacy Assessment Tool developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. AHRQ.gov.

1. Use the Pharmacy Health Literacy Assessment Tool developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. AHRQ.gov.
2. Contact Wisconsin Health Literacy to conduct an assessment. (608) 257-1655

How can you help low health literacy patients?

Below are some tested strategies that will help all patients—but especially those with low health literacy—gain the most benefit from their medications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Suggestions/Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Use plain language.</td>
<td>• “Blood pressure pill,” not “antihypertensive”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tell them only what they need to know, not what it is nice to know.</td>
<td>Limits to 3-5 key points</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Use pictures and tools to reinforce learning.</td>
<td>• Show yellow or pill box sample</td>
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<td>4 Slow down when you talk.</td>
<td>• Drive a simple message</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Listen for the patient’s own terms and use them in the discussion.</td>
<td>Watch for signs of confusion.</td>
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<td>6 Use analogies to help patients understand abstract concepts.</td>
<td>“The heart is like a pump.”</td>
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<td>7 Use specific, concrete words to provide instructions.</td>
<td>• “Take 1 hour before breakfast” rather than “take on empty stomach”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Provide easy-to-read and understand written materials.</td>
<td>Few messages, clear organization, short simple words, large type fonts, simple illustrations directly applicable to text</td>
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One of the best strategies to improve medication adherence with low health literacy patients is to conduct a Comprehensive Medication Review.

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