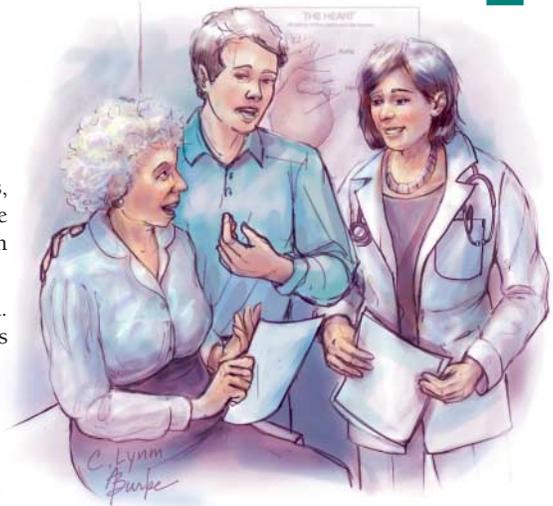


# Health Literacy

**H**ealth literacy is the ability to understand your health, medical care, and overall wellness. However, research shows that many adults find health information hard to understand. This includes what doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care professionals say, written medical instructions, and health insurance forms. Even when people have good access to health services, lack of information can make it difficult for patients and families to properly manage their health. The September 14, 2011, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about health literacy in patients.

Most people may find health care terms and instructions challenging to understand. However, low health literacy is particularly common among elderly persons, individuals with a chronic illness or disability, persons who live in poverty, individuals who do not speak English, and persons with a mental illness.

Research studies are looking at ways to provide easy-to-understand health information to help people with low health literacy make good decisions. In the meantime, here are some ways you can get the most out of a visit to your doctor.



## MAKING YOUR DOCTOR VISITS MORE HELPFUL

- For any medical visit, take a trusted person with you, such as a family member or close friend.
- Always ask questions if you do not understand something. Your doctor wants to make sure you know your condition and how to follow any medical instructions.
- Always bring to any medical visit an up-to-date list of all the medications you take, including over-the-counter products and any natural or herbal preparations. You may want to bring all your medications to your visit.
- Write down your questions and concerns before you go to any health care visit so you don't forget what you want to know.
- Ask your doctor to write down information and instructions discussed during your visit.
- If you have vision or hearing problems, ask for help. Your doctor can provide information in large print or use other resources to make sure you get information.

## FINDING RELIABLE INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

The Internet can be a good source for health information if you know where to look. However, it can be hard to determine whether a Web site can be trusted or is up to date. Here are some tips to help you start your Internet search:

- Government Web sites, like the National Institutes of Health ([www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)), provide accurate information to patients and families and can also point you in the right direction for other sites.
- Large nonprofit organizations, like the American Heart Association ([www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)) or American Cancer Society ([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)), can also be very helpful.
- If you find information that concerns you, bring it to your appointment and discuss it with your doctor.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality  
[www.ahrq.gov](http://www.ahrq.gov)
- National Institutes of Health  
[www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services  
[www.cms.gov](http://www.cms.gov)
- World Health Organization  
[www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on *JAMA*'s Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on the basics of health care insurance was published in the March 14, 2007, issue.

*Sources: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, National Institutes of Health, World Health Organization, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

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