

Ready, Set, Go: Know Your Risks

Leadership Tool for a Learning Organization

Health Literacy

WHY IS HEALTH LITERACY IMPORTANT?

- About 36% of U.S. adults have trouble reading and understanding moderately long health-related texts.¹
- When patients have difficulty understanding health information, they may be more likely to experience poor outcomes, adverse events, difficulty accessing care, gaps in care, inefficient care (e.g., excessive emergency department use, hospital readmission), loss of earnings or work productivity, or increased costs for child care or transportation.²
- Even people with adequate literacy may sometimes have trouble understanding health information. In addition, research indicates that people of all health literacy levels benefit from and prefer easy-to-understand materials.³
- When patients or family members have trouble understanding health information, healthcare organizations and their staff may share in the fallout. Examples of negative effects on the organization include adverse events, poor-quality care, inefficient use of healthcare, barriers to patients' self-determination, difficulty fulfilling the organization's mission, liability risks, and accreditation risks.

DID YOU ASK?

- Have we investigated the health and health literacy needs of the populations we serve? Do we appreciate how these challenges affect our patients?
- Have we integrated health literacy into our mission, goals, and strategic plan?
- Do we involve users in developing and testing health literacy initiatives and patient materials?
- Have we adopted a "universal precautions" approach to health literacy, in which we strive to make health information easy for everyone to understand?

Need More Information?

As a member of ECRI Institute's risk and patient safety program, you and your staff can access guidance outlining strategies to address health literacy:

- ▶ [Guidance: Health Literacy](#)
- ▶ [Health Literacy: Checklist for Creating or Evaluating Materials](#)
- ▶ [Health Literacy: Handout for In-Person Communication](#)
- ▶ [Guidance: Culturally and Linguistically Competent Care](#)

ECRI Institute can help you with all of your patient safety, quality, and risk management projects. E-mail us at hrc@ecri.org.

1 Kutner M, Greenberg E, Jin Y, et al. The health literacy of America's adults: results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy [online]. NCES 2006-483. 2006 Sep [cited 2015 Oct 13]. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006483.pdf>

2 American Medical Association (AMA). Health literacy and patient safety: help patients understand. Reducing the risk by designing a safer, shame-free health care environment. Chicago: American Medical Association Foundation; 2007 Aug. Available for purchase at <https://commerce.ama-assn.org/store/catalog/productDetail.jsp?skuld=sku1240015&productId=prod1240006>

3 Weiss BD. Health literacy and patient safety: help patients understand. Manual for clinicians. 2nd ed. Chicago: American Medical Association Foundation; 2007 May. Available for purchase as part of toolkit at <https://commerce.ama-assn.org/store/catalog/productDetail.jsp?skuld=sku1240029&productId=prod1240021>