

Making Decisions for Your Health: Getting the Info You Need

When your doctor prescribes a medication for your child, do you know what the correct dosage is or how to measure it?

Are you comfortable asking your doctor questions when you receive a lab report and don't understand the results?

Do you understand how to use the information on the Nutrition Facts Label on food products when you shop at the grocery store?

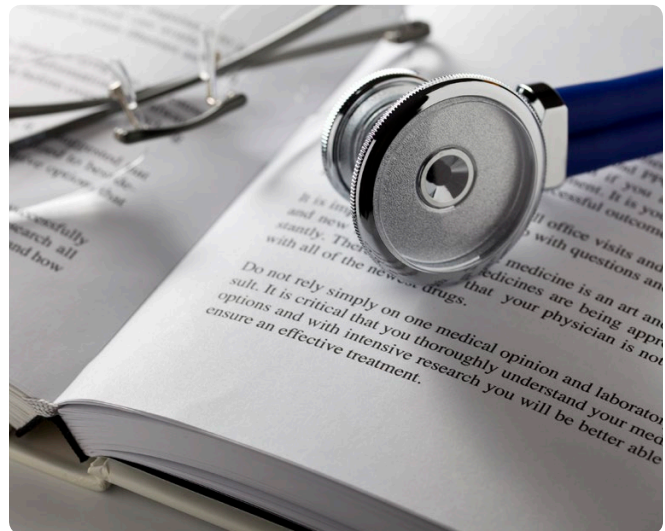
If you can answer “yes” to these questions, you might have high health literacy, says Jodi Duckhorn, a social scientist and Director of Risk Communications at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Duckhorn's team is responsible for making sure that messages FDA sends out are understandable to their intended target audiences—a key component of health literacy.

What Is Health Literacy?

What is health literacy? Simply put, it's the ability to get and understand information on health issues and medical services so that you can make informed decisions about your health, Duckhorn says.

If you don't have high health literacy, you're not alone. Only about 12 percent of U.S. adults have the skills to manage their health and prevent disease, according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. And without this essential knowledge, it can be hard for many people to learn how to improve their health.

According to the federal Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, health literacy requires basic language skills and knowledge of such health topics as nutrition or heart health. You might not make informed decisions about your health if you don't have a good grasp on the information your doctor is telling you, or if you are hesitant about asking questions pertaining to your health care.



For instance, the information you get from even a simple physical can be overwhelming, Duckhorn says. “It's easy to see how someone could be confused if test results for cancer come back negative, for instance,” she adds. “Intuitively, a patient might think that ‘negative’ is a ‘bad’ result rather than a good one.”

Consequences of Low Health Literacy

Low health literacy can have negative consequences. “Reduced health literacy affects your ability to talk with your healthcare professionals and use the healthcare system,” says Duckhorn. “It also limits your ability to interpret basic lab results (such as cholesterol and blood sugar) and numbers that measure medications, and understand nutrition labels.”

Lower health literacy is also linked to higher rates of hospitalization and less frequent use of services that can prevent you or your family from getting sick—often because you don't know where or how to find available services. And more sick people can lead to higher health costs.

“Often when you’re unwell, you feel out of control. But asking questions actually enables you to take control of your own health.”

How FDA Promotes Health Literacy

Promoting health literacy is important to FDA which communicates complex science and health topics every day. And it’s a key part of the agency’s effort to help the public make better informed decisions about the use of FDA-regulated products. The agency aims to provide clear and accurate information to patients and to health care professionals in several ways. For example, FDA strives to:

Use plain language for clear communications. FDA first identifies its audience. Then the agency sends communication materials with well-organized messages that use clear sentences and common words. This easy-to-understand language is especially important for popular FDA webpages, such as those that discuss seasonal flu and vaccines for children, and in FDA-approved patient package inserts (consumer-friendly summaries of patient information), instructions for use, and Medication Guides (paper handouts that come with many prescription medicines). FDA uses best practices in the principles of plain language in other communications, including videos and posts on Twitter and Facebook.

In addition, FDA uses Drug Safety Communications to let health care professionals and consumers know about newly observed potential risks of FDA-approved drugs and to offer advice on how these drugs may be best used in light of this new information. And when a drug or device is identified as unsafe, FDA informs consumers about market recalls and withdrawals.


Create special initiatives. Many FDA Offices and Centers use special initiatives to promote health literacy, says Duckhorn. For instance, FDA’s Center for Drug Evaluation and Research offers free online resources that teach you how to buy and use medicines safely. The Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition offers tips on how to use the Nutrition Facts Label. Plus, the Office of Health and Constituent Affairs operates a web portal called the FDA Patient Network. The Patient Network gives you access to health resources (including a newsletter) and can help you better understand the medical product regulation process.

Translate materials. “For people who speak English as a second language or not at all, understanding important health information can be an overwhelming challenge and an enormous barrier to health literacy,” says Jonca Bull, M.D., Assistant Commissioner for Minority Health. To that end, FDA offers safety updates and other materials for people with limited English skills. For example, the agency translates FDA Consumer Updates (like this one) into Spanish. It offers free health publications in multiple languages, such as Arabic and Tagalog. “In addition, we recently piloted a campaign on health fraud for people who have limited English proficiency by translating a Consumer Update and an accompanying video in several different languages,” Bull says.

How to Improve Your Own Health Literacy

You can start with FDA’s free publications, including those for women’s health and minority health. Then you can read FDA’s online resources for consumers to learn about health topics, such as those about medications and vaccines. FDA Consumer Updates offer free information about the latest agency news and research.

In addition, the agency has a Consumer Hotline for people who have questions and concerns about FDA-regulated products and issues. You can call the general hotline at 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332).

“Don’t ever be afraid to ask questions about your health care,” Duckhorn says. “Often when you’re unwell, you feel out of control. But asking questions actually enables you to take control of your own health.” 

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