



# HEALTH LITERACY:

## A summary for Consumers

Health literacy is important to your health and wellbeing, and to the safety and quality of your health care.

## What is health literacy?

**We used to think that health literacy was just about how well a person could find, understand and use health information — their skills and abilities and what they know about health.**

But it is actually much more than this, because the way health information and services are provided affects what you know and what you do about your health.

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (Commission) talks about two different parts that together shape how people understand health information and services:

### Individual health literacy

This is your skills and abilities, how well you can find, understand and act on health information, make health decisions and find and use health services.

Examples of this include how much you already know about health issues; the way your personal characteristics might shape your decisions; how much you know about risks; how confident you are at asking questions; and how well you can balance options when decisions need to be made.

### The health literacy environment

This includes the things that help you make your health decisions and the way that health care is delivered.

Examples include the way information about the choices you can make about your health is provided to you; information about health and health care in the media; the way health systems and processes are set up; and the way people such as healthcare providers and other staff talk to you about your health and health care.

#### INDIVIDUAL HEALTH LITERACY

Your skills, abilities, knowledge and experience

Understanding and being able to act on information about health and health care

#### HEALTH LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

How easy or hard information or services are to understand

## What about my individual health literacy?

**Only about 40% of adults have the level of individual health literacy they need to be able to make well-informed decisions and take action about their health.**

Lots of people have low individual health literacy - young and old people, professionals and non-professionals, highly educated and poorly educated people.

Your individual health literacy doesn't stay the same all the time. Individual health literacy can change when you are faced with different situations, if you are tired, unwell or distracted. For example, you may find it harder to organise doctor's appointments when you are not feeling well or feel stressed.

Some people may also be good at some types of health decisions, but may have difficulty with other types of health decisions. For example, one person might find it easy to understand how to follow a healthy diet, but hard to arrange home care for an aged parent, while another person might find the opposite.

### **Why is individual health literacy important to me?**

People with low individual health literacy find it harder to understand their choices and make the best decisions about their health.

It is harder for them to know which foods to eat, how much they should exercise, which

health services they need, how to follow medication instructions, when to contact a doctor, how to decide between treatment options and how to maintain a care plan.

This influences their health and wellbeing.

Low levels of individual health literacy affect the safety and quality of health care. People with low individual health literacy are more likely to be hospitalised, to need to go to an emergency department and to have poorer health outcomes.



## What is my health literacy environment?

**Your health literacy environment is all around you. It is how you get information about health, where you get it and who you get it from.**

For example, it includes health product packaging and design, information hospitals send you in preparation for procedures, medication information provided by your doctor or information provided by your health insurer.

It also includes the health services you use, how they are organised, how complicated they are and how much they support you to make the best health decisions for you.

Examples of this include how well signs and instructions are displayed in a hospital; how

you are provided with information about referrals; the type of steps you need to take to make a doctor's appointment; how you claim your Medicare refund or the support you are provided with to maintain your care plan.

The health literacy environment can be hard to understand – different professions often speak in jargon; people make assumptions about what you already know; and there are thousands of healthcare processes which can be different in different health services.

### Improving health literacy

**Low levels of individual health literacy are linked with poorer outcomes. It is important that we all try to improve health literacy so that we get better and safer care.**

This can be done by making the health literacy environment easier to understand and improving individual health literacy.

#### Doing this can help you:

- Know where to go, what to do and how to find what you need to improve your health and wellbeing
- Make better decisions about your health, wellbeing and health care
- Manage your own health care and that of your family
- Feel empowered to improve the health system for others.



## What can I do to improve my health literacy?

### You can improve your own individual health literacy by doing things like:

- Asking for more information if you don't understand something
- Taking a friend with you to healthcare appointments if you need support
- Asking for a translator if you need one
- Giving your healthcare provider all details of your medical history
- Actively seeking out information about your health and care.

You can also help your healthcare organisation improve its health literacy environment. For example, you can become involved in the way your health service is run by being part of an advisory group, providing feedback on their services via surveys or compliments/complaints boxes, or getting involved in the development of patient information materials.



## What your healthcare professionals can do

**Healthcare professionals are also being encouraged to support you to better understand information about your health and health care. Some of the things healthcare professionals can do include:**

- Recognising that what they are saying may not be easy to understand
- Giving you the opportunity to share decisions about your care, if you wish to
- Using a range of different ways of communicating with you
- Encouraging you to speak up if information is hard to understand
- Using tools to explain healthcare options and share decisions about care



## What is the Commission doing?

**Because so many different things can influence a person's health literacy, many people and organisations need to work together in different ways to address health literacy.**

The Commission is building national action on health literacy. We are working to get lots of different organisations to start thinking about what they can do to address health literacy across health, education and social services.

The Commission is also supporting healthcare organisations to improve their health literacy environment – to make their information, systems and processes easier to understand and use.

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### Where can I find out more about health literacy?

**Australian Commission on Safety and Quality of Health Care: Health literacy: Taking action to improve safety and quality**

<http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/patient-and-consumer-centred-care/health-literacy/>

**Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care: Ten tips for safer care**

<http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2003/01/10-tips-for-Safer-Health-Care-%E2%80%93-Fact-Sheet-PDF-68KB.pdf>

**AskShareKnow web page**

<http://www.askshareknow.com.au/>

**NSW Clinical Excellence Commission: Health Literacy Guide**

<http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/hlg>

**Our Health web page**

<http://ourhealth.org.au/>

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