

1.11 Health Literacy Significance for Special Populations: Elderly Learners

Health literacy is believed to decline with age. Just as many older Americans are developing more complex and chronic health issues, undergoing more complex medical treatments, and taking more medications than ever before in their lives, their abilities to manage all the health care information they are receiving are likely decreasing.

- According to data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2003), [“adults age 65 and older have lower health literacy scores than all other age groups surveyed.”](#)
- The elderly also face challenges in **understanding their options for paying for care.** Many elderly are at risk of being underinsured.
- Generational and cultural issues may make it harder for some learners who are elderly to communicate and advocate for their own needs and preferences in health care.

Possible Topics for Health Literacy Education

- Finding reliable health information on the Internet
- Reading a lab test result
- How to find information on Medicare and supplemental coverage
- How to find information on specific health conditions learners have been diagnosed with
- When and how to contact a health care provider in an emergency
- General information on when to call the doctor versus go to the ER
- Community support services for the elderly, such as agencies on aging
- Names of medical specialists
- Health conditions related to aging

Teach strategies for **clear communication** with health care providers:

- Brainstorming and writing down questions about conditions and treatments before seeing doctor
- Knowing what questions are appropriate to ask a health care provider
- Knowing questions to ask about medication reactions and side effects
- Requesting that a health care provider write down or record information for the patient to review later
- [Ask Me 3](#) and Teach Back methods (see [1.2.7](#) in this toolkit)
- Encouraging learner to take a supportive person to doctor appointments to be a second pair of ears



Teach strategies for **retaining and organizing** health information:

- Keeping a written health history
- Keeping a list of health care providers and their contact information
- Keeping an “in case of emergency” contact in phone or wallet
- Keeping a list of medications and doses for one’s own reference and to show health care providers
- Finding strategies to help oneself keep medications straight

Resources

[**Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality: Elderly Healthcare**](#)

[**MedlinePlus: Seniors’ Health**](#)

[**Problems with Elderly Healthcare**](#)

This 2011 article by Julie Boehlke addresses the elderly care gap, prescription medications, and underinsurance; it is available from Livestrong.com.

[**NIHSeniorHealth.gov**](#)

[**Quick Guide to Health Literacy and Older Adults**](#)

This guide is published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[**AARP: Health**](#)

