

1.15 Health Literacy Significance for Special Populations: Learners who are Blind or have Low Vision

“There are many challenges that people with vision loss face when dealing with the medical community. It mostly revolves around printed materials that are filled with vital information and are virtually inaccessible. For example: receipts with future appointment dates and times; follow-up instructions; directions for taking medication; illustrations of exercises assigned in PT or OT; DVD informational films; literature explaining a condition recently diagnosed; filling out patient forms; signing consent forms; following signs in an unfamiliar hospital setting; using automated check-in devices; signing in at the reception desk; prescription labels and patient information attached to prescriptions; and many more visual tasks that without appropriate accommodations or skills are not accessible to those with low or no vision. I have heard stories of people being turned away for an appointment with a doctor because they didn’t have anyone with them who could help them fill out the forms. Often, people do not know to ask for help, or what help to ask for, and the medical staff may or may not be willing to give that help. I try to get forms in advance so my husband can help me fill them out at home. I would prefer an accessible electronic version that I could fill out myself, but usually the forms are locked PDF files that you cannot edit. When I have gone for PT, I take a digital recorder to record the details of how to do the exercise and other instructions. I can also record future appointments or use an accessible calendar on my phone, computer, or note-taking device. I prefer communication via email if printed information or referral information is going to be shared. I ask a lot of questions and am not afraid to call the office, but not everyone is as assertive as I am and some may not possess or have the skills to use adaptive devices like digital recorders.”

—Neva Fairchild, National Independent Living Associate
American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)
(personal communication, 12/10/12)

Neva Fairchild’s words starkly illustrate the challenges faced by blind and vision-impaired patients in the U.S. health care system. With the aging of the population and rising rates of diabetes, vision loss will possibly become more common among learners.



In the U.S., the four most prevalent causes of vision loss among adults 40 years of age and older are age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, glaucoma, and diabetic retinopathy. In addition to other health content, ESOL learners who are blind or have low vision may be interested in learning how to do some of the following in English, or with the help of an interpreter:

- Request what help they need in order to access and understand information in health care situations.
 - Assistive devices? Recordings? Magnifiers?
 - Someone to read printed information to them?
- Express their communication preferences and what help they would like with signing forms in health care.
- Describe what assistive devices they have access to at home to help with medical treatment needs.
- Express their preferences for getting acclimated to the physical environment in health care (say, a hospital room).
- Request special labeling of medications, in braille or large type, at the pharmacy.
- Access information and services for people who are blind or have low vision. Here are some:
 - **[Perkins Scout Clearinghouse:](#)**
Perkins Scout is an information clearinghouse on blindness and visual impairment maintained by the Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts
 - **[Virginia Navigator:](#)** Choose “Find Services” and use the “Guided Search.” Type in a learner’s zip code. Then choose to find services by word or words and type in “blind.” This should bring up a list of available public and private services in the learner’s area.
 - **[Local Departments of Social Services:](#)**
This webpage lists Virginia’s departments of social services. You can contact these to connect the learner with services for people with disabilities such as blindness.
 - **[Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired:](#)**
This website provides information on services available in the state.
 - **[Lion’s Clubs:](#)**
Lions Clubs provide eyeglasses and other support to the visually impaired. This site lists contact information for Virginia clubs.



- **National Organizations for Blind and Vision Impaired (may offer local services):**
 - [American Foundation for the Blind:](#)
The section on seniors has a health care component.
 - [National Federation for the Blind](#)
 - [Lighthouse International](#)
- **Local Paratransit Services:** Google for your region.

Resources

[Health and Aging from VisionAware: Resources for Independent Living with Vision Loss](#)

[Improving Health Care Experiences of Persons who are Blind or have Low Vision: Suggestions from Focus Groups](#)

This 2004 article from the *American Journal of Medical Quality* was written by Bonnie L. O'Day, Mary Killeen, and Lisa I. Iezzoni.

[Tips for Hospital Staff Members and Caregivers](#)

These tips for assisting blind or visually impaired patients were compiled by Carl M. McCarl and made available online by Blindskills, Inc.

[The Visually Impaired Patient](#)

This 2008 article by Eric A. Rosenberg and Laura C. Sperazza appeared in the journal *American Family Physician*, volume 77, number 10, pages 1431-1436.

[Healthcare Experiences of Women with Visual Impairment](#)

This 2010 article by Nancy C. Sharts-Hopko, Suzanne Smeltzer, Barbara B. Ott, and Vanessa Zimmerman was published in the journal *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, volume 24, issue 3, pages 149-153. The article abstract is available online.

