

From the Parish Nurse

Health Literacy

For more information on the topic of health literacy, you can go to:

<http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/factsbasic.htm>

<http://www.npsf.org/for-patients-consumers/>

Did you know that nine out of 10 adults may not have the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease? This means that these persons are not able *to read, understand, and act on* health information that is given to them. Who are these adults? You might think it is only the elderly or people with limited education. Well, it can be anyone! Why? Anyone can struggle to understand medical jargon and confusing forms, no matter how educated you are. It is difficult to remember information that is given in a stressful or unfamiliar situation.

The ability to read, understand and act on health information is called health literacy. Not being able to understand and follow the instructions of your doctor(s), nurse, pharmacist, or other health care professionals can make your health worse rather than better. This is especially true for people who have to manage chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, asthma, diabetes, HIV/AIDS. For example, a person with diabetes not only must be able to check his or her blood sugar level, he or she must also know what to do if the level is too high or too low, must know how to measure the medications, and understand how to read food labels. A person with high blood pressure should understand why it is important to know what foods contain a lot of salt and how to manage stress.

Health illiteracy (which means that a person is not able to read, understand and act on health information) is reaching epidemic proportions and the health care professions are working to do something about it. Written materials for the general audience should be written at a 4th to 6th grade reading level; most health care materials have been written at a 10th grade or above reading level. Now it is easier to find health care materials that are “Easy-to-Read”. This means that the material is written in “plain language” that most people can understand rather than in medical terms.

What can you do to become more health literate? The Partnership for Clear Health Communication suggests that every time you talk to a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist you will ask the following 3 questions to help you understand your health:

1. *What is my main problem?*
2. *What do I need to do?*
3. *Why is it important for me to do this?*

If you do not understand the health care instructions being given to you, don't be embarrassed to ask the person to explain the instructions more simply – and to write them down for you if necessary. Ask the doctor, nurse or pharmacist about medication instructions that are not clear. If you are signing a consent form for surgery or other procedure, ask for a simpler explanation if you do not understand what is going to be done, why it is being done, what the complications might be, or what your restrictions you will have after the procedure. Always remember, there is no such thing as a stupid question – especially when it comes to your health!