

Assessing and Addressing Health Literacy May 2015

Asking the following targeted questions can help identify low health literacy:

- Medical terms are complicated and many people find the words difficult to understand. Do you ever get help from others in filling out forms, reading prescription labels, insurance forms, and/or health education sheets?
- A lot of people have trouble reading and remembering health information because it is difficult. Is this ever a problem for you?
- How happy are you with the way you read?
- How much time do you spend reading each day? What do you like to read? (Newspapers are 10th grade reading level and news magazines are at the 12th grade level).
- When you have to learn something new or unfamiliar, how do you prefer to learn the information? Do you like to learn by watching TV, listening to the radio, talking with people, trying it yourself, or reading?

Another way to assess for low health literacy is to ask patients to read their prescription bottles and then explain how to take their medication. Chew, Bradley, A & Boyko, (2004) found three questions to be an effective screening tool for those with below basic health literacy skills (5th grade level or less), but not as effective for identifying patients with higher levels of health literacy skills.

- How often do you have somebody help you read hospital materials?
- How confident are you filling out medical forms by yourself?
- How often do you have problems learning about your medical condition because of difficulty understanding written information?

Wallace et al. (2006) evaluated the three questions from the Chew et al. (2004) study and concluded that combinations of multiple questions were no more effective in identifying those with low health literacy than one single question. They reported that the question "How confident are you filling out medical forms by yourself?" was the most accurate of the three questions.