

## Tips for Providers

**Health literacy is the ability to understand basic health information and obtain services needed to make appropriate health decisions. Low health literacy can prevent patients from understanding their health care services, including instructions on prescription bottles, appointment slips, and consent forms.**

### Things to Keep in Mind

- Know your audience:
  - Keep the patient's age, social and cultural diversity, language skills, literacy level and communication capacity in mind when explaining information
  - Acknowledge and respect cultural differences
  - Ask bilingual patients what language they prefer
- Engage patients by including answers to the following questions when providing information:
  - What is the patient's main problem?
  - What does the patient need to do?
  - Why is it important for the patient to do this?

### During the Consultation

- **Verbal Aides to Promote Health Literacy**
  - Use plain language and everyday examples
  - Avoid jargon, acronyms and technical language
  - Limit number of messages and focus on actions
  - Ask open-ended questions
  - State important information first and then restate it
  - Ask patients to repeat information back to you
  - Use metaphors or tell stories to convey information
  - Read written instructions out loud

- Speak slowly
- Encourage questions
- **Visual Aides to Promote Health Literacy**
  - Make written communication easy to read by using 12 point font or larger, avoiding fancy script, and making use of clear headings, bullet points and white space to break up the text
  - Supplement written instructions with informative images
  - Draw pictures or use objects and/or models when explaining health topics

## Possible Signs of Low Health Literacy

Sometimes a patient's low health literacy may not be obvious. Here are some signs to look for.

- Your patients may frequently say:
  - I forgot my glasses
  - My eyes are tired
  - I'll take this home for my family to read
  - What does this say? I don't understand
- Your patient's behavior may include:
  - Not getting their prescriptions filled or taking the medications as prescribed
  - Consistently missing or arriving late to appointments
  - Returning incomplete forms
  - Requiring several calls between appointments to clarify instructions