

EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE: HEALTH LITERACY (CNIN: APRIL 2010)

Health literacy is more than being able to read instructions. It is a fundamental skill that enables people to maintain good health and make informed health choices. However, the [findings from the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey](#) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggest that 59% of Australians have less than adequate health literacy skills.

Poorer health literacy is linked to poorer health status. Those with poor health literacy skills may find many health related activities such as describing and measuring symptoms, managing medicines, finding services or assessing the benefits and harms of different treatments difficult. Older people frequently have long term health conditions as well as lower levels of health literacy which in turn could affect how well they manage these conditions.



Health literacy and palliative care

Palliative care patients and their carers will have varying levels of health literacy. This could affect what they understand and how they manage symptoms and concerns.

Patient and carer materials should be designed to include those with limited health literacy skills. Readability scales are a good way to check that consumer materials are written at the right level. Pictures can help communicate meaning. When talking to patients and carers use plain language. Offer them the chance to clarify or repeat what was said. Check that they have understood.

In research studies, it is important that participants understand what is involved and their rights. Questionnaires and research tools such as patient diaries need to be written and designed to support patient and family participation.

Finding out more

[Fast Facts and Concepts #153: Health literacy in palliative medicine](#)

[CareSearch Health Literacy page](#)

[US Department of Health & Human Services: Health Literacy Improvement page](#)

CareSearch is an online resource funded by the Department of Health and Ageing to help clinicians and consumers find relevant evidence about palliative care. Available now at www.caresearch.com.au