

# **Quick Start Guide**

## **Promoting Health Literacy**

## **Throughout Your Practice**

### **Three Things You Can Do Right Now:**

- 1. Welcome Your Patients**
- 2. Walk Through Your Practice**
- 3. Listen to Your Phone System**

## **Why does it matter?**

**Low health literacy is associated with:**

- ♦ Poor use of health care services.**
- ♦ Worse health outcomes.**
- ♦ Medication errors.**
- ♦ More hospitalizations and use of emergency care.<sup>1</sup>**

### Health Literacy

Health Literacy refers to a set of skills that people need to function effectively in the health care environment.<sup>1</sup> Many Americans struggle to understand and act on health information, and research suggests that when people visit their doctor, they may understand and retain only half of the information discussed.<sup>2,3</sup> Over one-third of adults in the US have limited health literacy<sup>4</sup>, and it is not just those that you think may have difficulty. Anyone who is in pain, worried about a new diagnosis or under stress may have trouble understanding and acting on health information. Watch this short [health literacy video](#) to learn more.



### How does this affect your practice?

Limited health literacy may impact your practice through:

- **Increased phone calls** to clarify information.
- **Cancelled appointments** because patients can't find your office, or are not properly prepared for procedures.
- **Patient dissatisfaction** if they don't feel welcome or misunderstand instructions and are not benefiting from therapies.
- **Decreased patient safety** because patients are not following directions, for example, taking the wrong dose of medicine.

The way you organize your practice and communicate with patients may help to minimize confusion and lead to better health outcomes.

## 1. Welcome Your Patients

**Creating a friendly, calm office environment** may help your patients feel more comfortable and encourage them to ask questions.

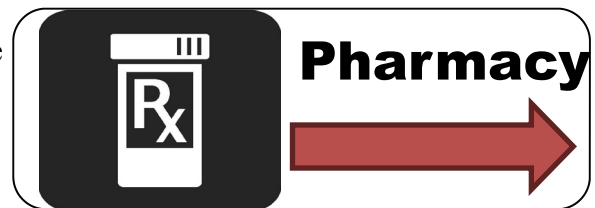


- **Front Desk Staff:**

- ◇ Are helpful and cheerful, asking “How can I help you?”
- ◇ Offer assistance with forms.
- ◇ Assess language preferences using [“I Speak” cards](#) and offer interpreter services.
- ◇ Encourage questions by asking “What questions do you have?” or “Were all your questions answered today?”

- **Signs to Guide Patients are:**

- ◇ Clearly Visible to Patients.
- ◇ Designed using text that is large and easy to see.
- ◇ Written in the language(s) of most of your patients.
- ◇ Used to identify key locations in the office.



- **Waiting Room includes:**

- ◇ Bulletin Boards that are easy to read and colorful.
- ◇ Photos of office staff including name and position.
- ◇ Posters to encourage patients to ask questions.

### 2. Walk Through Your Practice

**Creating an environment in your practice that is friendly and easy to navigate** may help to eliminate barriers and encourage patients to participate in their health care.

#### **Conduct a walk-through assessment of your practice:**

- Staring at the front of your building, ask one or two staff members and/or a patient to walk around and assess the following about your practice:
  - ◇ **Front Desk** - is it easy to find, are staff welcoming and cheerful, do staff offer assistance as needed, are practice brochures available?
  - ◇ **Waiting Room**—is it tidy, are bulletin boards or posters attractive and uncluttered?
  - ◇ **Signs**—are they clearly visible and easy to read, written in the languages of most patients, and do they identify key areas such as Entrance/Exit, Front Desk, Laboratory, Restrooms?
  - ◇ **Other**—Is staff accessible to assist patients?
- Discuss results and make changes as needed.
- After making changes, conduct a follow-up walkthrough to re-evaluate and assess progress



### 3. Listen to your Phone System



#### How does your practice sound on the phone?

The telephone is often a patient's first interaction with a practice, and will likely shape their impressions. Efficient, courteous phone service may save your practice money, time and improve patient satisfaction.

During our testing, one practice manager listened to staff voice mail messages, and was surprised by the inconsistency and inaccurate information provided.

#### Assess your phone system:

- Call your practice at different times including:
  - ◊ During business hours
  - ◊ After hours (in the evening and on the weekend)
- Is it difficult to get through?  
Are you greeted with a friendly, conversational voice that uses [Plain Language](#) ?
- If the phone system is **automated**:
  - ◊ Listen to the menu choices to ensure they are easy to understand and not overwhelming? ([Example telephone menu](#))
  - ◊ Try the options, how quickly can patients get the information they need?
  - ◊ Include an option to speak with a staff person.
- Ask your patients about the phone service?

#### How is your telephone etiquette?

- Do staff speak clearly at a comfortable pace?
- Do staff confirm understanding when providing information or instructions?
- Are scripts available for clear answers to common questions?



#### Educate your Patients about the Phone System:

- Talk with your patients. Tell them exactly how to get the services they need (e.g. 'Call our main number and press 3 to speak with a nurse.')
- Put up posters in the waiting room.

#### Resources:

For additional information refer to ["How Does Your Practice Sound on the Phone?"](#)

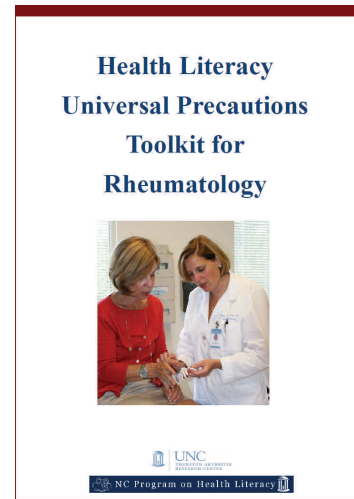
## Where do you go from here?

If this information has been helpful, and you want to learn more, then click on the [list of tools](#) or download the [Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit for Rheumatology](#).

This toolkit was written to help practices transform the way they work. Follow our [Path to Improvement](#) for a step-by-step approach to:

- forming a team,
- raising awareness,
- assessing your practice, and
- planning changes.

You can use the tools as a guide to making changes throughout your practice. Review each tool as a team, plan and implement some changes and talk about how you see these techniques reduce phone calls, reduce cancelled appointments and increase patient satisfaction and compliance.



## References

1. Berkman ND, Sheridan SL, et al. Low health literacy and health outcomes: an updated systematic review. *Ann Intern Med.* 2011;155:97-107.
2. Kessels RP. Patients' memory for medical information. *J R Soc Med.* 2003;96(5):219-22.
3. Schillinger D, Piette J, Grumbach K, et al., Closing the loop: physician communication with diabetic patients who have low health literacy. *Arch Intern Med.* 2003;163(1):83-90.
4. Kutner M, Greenberg E, Jin Y, Paulsen C. The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006-483). Washington, DC; U.S. Department of Education, National Center For Education Statistics; 2006.