

HEALTHWORD

Putting Health Promotion Back in Motion

July 2005

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HEALTHWORD is a monthly e-mail newsletter produced by the American Society on Aging's Live Well, Live Long project, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Live Well, Live Long provides education and resources to professionals in the field of aging to help them improve health promotion and disease prevention efforts aimed at older adults. Current and past issues of this newsletter are available on the Live Well, Live Long website at <http://www.asaging.org/cdc/HealthWord.cfm>.

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Low health literacy presents serious -- and hidden -- health risks for older adults

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FEATURE:

THE HIDDEN RISK OF LOW HEALTH LITERACY FOR OLDER ADULTS

By Sandra Maldague, Janet Ohene-Frempong, and Joanne Schwartzberg

Nearly half of your clients may have an undiagnosed condition -- low health literacy -- that prevents them from benefiting from the treatment plans and programs that you design. More than 90 million adults with low health literacy skills have limited ability to read and understand the instructions contained on prescriptions or medicine bottles, appointment slips, informed consent documents, insurance forms, and health educational materials.

For people with chronic diseases, low health literacy has been documented as resulting in poorer health outcomes. Studies have shown that older adults in managed care settings, especially those ages 85 and above, and older African Americans in hospital settings experience higher levels of low health literacy and literacy-related problems than other groups. Many older adults, regardless of their nationality or culture, had to quit school early to work and never learned to read, or to

read well enough to understand health information. Between 71 and 85 percent of the nation's adults 65 and older have difficulty reading and are therefore at risk for literacy-related health problems. The incidence of low health literacy increases with age, with the greatest burdens falling on those over 75.

Materials and programs designed to be sensitive to the issue of low health literacy are more likely to succeed in informing and inspiring older adults. In their landmark publication, "Teaching Patients With Low Literacy Skills" (J.B. Lippincott, 1996), Cecelia Doak, Leonard Doak, and Jane Root provided some of the first practical guidelines for communicating health information. They emphasized that the size of the print, the speed of the voice, and the complexity of language can all affect health outcomes.

Over the past decade, healthcare professionals have become increasingly aware of the need to be guided by principles of effective communication in designing forms, surveys, and health education materials as well as in providing verbal advice and counseling. For many clients, visual aids, illustrated stories, and oral communication may be more appropriate than print materials. Addressing low health literacy does not entail "dumbing down" information. In fact, strong readers who are either busy or not medically sophisticated also benefit from this enlightened approach.

In-language print and video materials and interpreter services for people whose first language is not English are important to provide for reasons of informed consent, instructions for self-care, and health education. In fact, interpreter services are required by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act in all healthcare settings -- for more information, see the Office for Civil Rights' Guidance Memorandum at <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/lep>.

In the videos "Low Health Literacy" and "Health Literacy: Help Your Patients Understand," the American Medical Association advocates the use of two key strategies to avoid miscommunication on health issues: the teach-back method and the creation of a "shame-free" environment. Professionals using the teach-back method explain to patients what they need to do, break up the information into understandable parts, and then ask the patient to repeat what they have heard. In a shame-free environment, patients are not afraid to ask any healthcare professional or member of the office staff for information or clarification, and healthcare professionals and support staff are proactive in letting patients know they are available to help.

Sandra Maldague serves as manager of health promotion at the American Society on Aging and staff liaison for ASA's Healthcare and Aging Network.

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TOOLS YOU CAN USE: HEALTH LITERACY RESOURCES ON THE WEB

For more information about health literacy and older adults, visit the following websites:

* Health literacy page of ASA's Healthcare and Aging Network (HAN)
<http://www.asaging.org/networks/han/healthlit.cfm>

This page contains an overview of a recent program on health literacy. It includes speakers' PowerPoint slides and a resource list on health literacy and aging.

* American Medical Association resources

Health literacy videos

<http://classes.kumc.edu/general/amaliteracy/>

The videos "Low Health Literacy" and "Health Literacy: Help Your Patients Understand" are available to download for free.

Book: Schwartzberg, J. G., VanGeest, J. B., Wang, C. C., eds. "Understanding Health Literacy: Implications for Medicine and Public Health" (AMA Press, 2005).

https://catalog.ama-assn.org/Catalog/product/product_detail.jsp?productId=prod240170

This recent book is a comprehensive resource of health literacy research. It aims to improve understanding of the public health challenge of low health literacy and help healthcare professionals improve the quality of care for their patients.

Webpage: "What Others Are Doing"

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/11231.html>

This AMA Foundation webpage lists upcoming training events on health literacy.

* Partnership for Clear Health Communication

<http://www.askme3.org>

This partnership includes numerous nonprofit healthcare and aging organizations, such as the National Council on Aging and the American Medical Association. As part of the organization's "Ask Me 3" campaign, the members developed health-literacy educational materials for healthcare professionals. The campaign suggests that patients learn to ask healthcare providers the three following questions:

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

* National Institute for Literacy Listserve

To subscribe: http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/nifl-health/health_literacy.html

This organization runs an excellent listserv on health literacy. Although the subject is not limited to older adults, many of the issues discussed on the listserv are cross-cutting.

* AARP issue brief: "Adequate Literacy and Health Literacy: Prerequisites for Informed Health Care Decision Making"

http://research.aarp.org/health/ib70_literacy.html

This AARP Public Policy Institute issue brief, written by Joyce Dubow, provides a comprehensive overview of recent research on health literacy and its relationship to the health and well-being of older adults.

SPECIAL PROGRAM:
FALL SERIES ON AGING

The American Society on Aging is turning over a new leaf, moving its popular Summer Series on Aging to the fall. The Autumn Series offers regional training for the many types of professionals who work with older adults, their caregivers, and their families. It is an excellent opportunity to earn continuing education credits while gaining new knowledge and insights from experts in the field. The series will be held on both coasts:

East Coast Series: Philadelphia, September 12-15, 2005

West Coast Series: San Francisco, September 26-29, 2005

Intensives focusing on health promotion include the following:

* Holistic Health for Lifelong Wellness (both coasts)

The intensive will focus on the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual processes of health and aging; the major health issues that are best managed from a holistic perspective; and the application of a holistic perspective on wellness.

* Brain Health Across the Lifespan (East Coast only)

If the human brain can generate new brain cells, a new frontier of discovery and opportunity emerges. This session champions a lifelong and proactive lifestyle as critical to maximizing brain health and perhaps delaying neurodegenerative disorders.

* Diabetes: At the HEART of the Matter (East Coast only)

This session is designed for nonmedical supportive caregivers and others who care for older adults with diabetes. The focus will be on day-to-day management of the disease, including monitoring, diet, activity, medications, and prevention of complications.

* What's Hot in Health Promotion Today (West Coast only)

This workshop will explore current information on national and local initiatives to address the areas of falls prevention, diabetes prevention and management, older driver safety and wellness, physical activity, and nutrition.

* Diabetes Care in Older Adults (West Coast only)

This session discusses what people can do to better manage diabetes, offering tips for early detection of diabetes and diabetes-related problems and tips to improve quality of life for people with diabetes.

* Use It and You May Not Lose It: Breakthroughs for Healthy Aging of the Brain (West Coast only)

A few decades ago, scientists believed that the brain was “hard-wired” at a very early age. Scientists have since shown that the brain can be “rewired” by learning -- at any age. Learn about remarkable recent breakthroughs in brain research and their potential impact on your life from some of the world's leading scientists.

For more details on the series, including presenter descriptions, lodging and logistical information, instructions on how to obtain continuing education credits, and an online registration form, visit <http://www.asaging.org/autumn-series>.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Event: Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging Annual Conference

Dates: September 12-13, 2005

Location: Columbus, Ohio

Sponsored by the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging, this conference will bring professionals in Ohio working with older adults together for cutting-edge workshops on current aging-related issues. The conference includes three preconference intensives, twelve breakout sessions, and three keynote presentations. For more information, call (614) 481-3511.

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Event: Second Conference on Aging in the Americas

Dates: September 21-22, 2005

Location: Austin, Texas

The Second Conference on Aging in the Americas, whose theme is “Key Issues in Hispanic Health and Healthcare Policy Research,” will provide a detailed analysis of the consequences of population processes, including international migration, behavioral aspects of mental health, and the formulation of U.S. and Latin American old-age policies. There is no registration fee for the conference, but space is limited. For more information, visit <http://www.pop.psu.edu/cpha/saia/>.

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For more educational offerings in the field of aging, visit the searchable “Events in Aging” calendar on the ASA website: <http://www.asaging.org/calendar>.

Have an event related to health promotion and aging that you would like to tell your colleagues about? Please submit your event, call for papers, or grant announcements to Nancy Bui at nbui@asaging.org. Include the title, organization, date and time, location, contact information, and a short description of the event.

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HEALTHWORD (ISSN 1554-5997) is published monthly by the American Society on Aging through a grant provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Subscription is free of charge, and you are welcome to forward this newsletter to interested colleagues.

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LIVE WELL, LIVE LONG

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