

“Patients have the right to understand health care information [they need] to safely care for themselves...Health care providers have a duty to provide information in simple, clear and plain language, and to check that patients have understood the information before ending the conversation.”

American Medical Association. Proceedings of 2005 White House Conference on Aging, Mini-Conference on Health Literacy and Health Disparities

Nearly 90% of US adults lack health literacy skills needed to navigate the health system (Kutner et al., 2006) and anyone can experience limited health literacy, depending on the circumstances. Research links limited health literacy to poor health outcomes and health inequities. Communication impacts quality, safety, health equity, and patient-/client-centered care and experiences.

Health literacy is fundamental to quality, safety, patient-centered care, and equitable treatment (Institute of Medicine, 2004), and is prioritized by Healthy People 2030 as an overarching goal and foundational principle to achieve health equity.

The Healthy People 2030 definition of organizational health literacy—“the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others”—and the Ten Attributes of Health Literate Health Care Organizations (Brach et al., 2012) underscore the health system’s responsibility for using health literacy-informed communication strategies, foremost among which is teach-back.

Teach-back is an evidence-based health literacy intervention to improve communication and health outcomes. It entails showing you are taking responsibility for being clear, and asking a person, in a caring way, to explain back information provided by the health team about what they need to know or do, using their own words.

Teach-back can be used by anyone sharing important information in clinical and non-clinical settings throughout the health continuum—nurses, dentists, physicians, public health professionals, social workers, community health workers, therapists, support staff, and more.

Teach-back:

- Promotes patient, family, and client understanding,
- Supports quality and safety, and shared decision-making, and
- Improves health literacy (Miller et al., 2021; Seely et al., 2022; Talevski et al., 2020; Yen & Leasure, 2019).
- Can help reduce health disparities (Coleman, 2023).

Many health-related entities recommend using health literacy-informed communication approaches, including teach-back: the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, American Dental Association, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Quality Forum, The Joint Commission, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Leapfrog Group, Institute for Healthcare Improvement, and Institute of Medicine (now National Academy of Medicine).

Health care, public health, health-focused community-based, payor, health professions education, and other health-related organizations should incorporate health literacy and teach-back into their full array of services, including training and education, prevention, care delivery, service provision, research agendas, funding streams, and quality, safety, and health equity initiatives.

Read and listen to [Stories and Insights about People Struggling to Understand](#).