



---

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# About Health Literacy

This information explains health literacy, including what it is and what you can do to improve your health literacy.

## What is health literacy?

Your health literacy is how easily you can find, understand, and use health information and services. It's different from normal literacy (being able to read and write). Health literacy involves things such as:

- Problem solving
- Using health information to make health decisions
- Navigating (finding your way around) healthcare systems

Improving your health literacy can help you follow your treatment plan more closely and avoid extra visits to the hospital or emergency room.

Even if you're usually comfortable understanding health information, feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or worried can make it harder for you to learn and remember new things. This means your health literacy can change based on how worried you are or the situation you're in.

## How can I improve my health literacy?

Your healthcare providers can help you learn and answer your questions. Good communication between you and your healthcare providers is one of the most important parts of health literacy.

Your healthcare providers will do their best to communicate with you in a way that's clear and easy to understand. You can help them by following these tips.

## Think about how you learn best

People learn in different ways. For example, you may like to learn by reading or watching information, listening to information, or by doing a hands-on activity (such as practicing an action).

If your healthcare providers understand how you like to learn, it can help them share information in the way that's best for you.

- If you know you learn best by reading text or watching videos, ask your healthcare providers for an educational resource about the information you're learning. You can also search for resources yourself by visiting [www.msk.org/pe](http://www.msk.org/pe), MSK's Patient and Caregiver Education website.
- If you learn best by listening to information, ask your healthcare providers to talk with you about what you need to know. It might also be helpful to ask for a written resource to help you remember your conversation after your appointment.
- If you're learning an action (such as changing a bandage or taking off a chemotherapy bottle), ask your healthcare providers if you can practice during your appointment. Your healthcare providers can show you how to do it, then watch while you do it yourself. They can also help you find a written or video resource to help you remember how to do it at home.

## Ask for an interpreter

If you're more comfortable using a language other than English, tell your healthcare providers. They can request an interpreter so you're able to use the language you're most comfortable with.

Many of MSK's educational resources are available in more than 1 language. If your healthcare providers give you an educational resource in a language other than the one you like to use, ask if they have the resource in your language.

## **Think about what information you want**

Before your appointment, think about what you already know and what you want to learn. At the beginning of your appointment, you can tell your healthcare providers what you want to talk about. You can also tell them if you prefer general information or if you want to know more details.

Many people search for health information on the Internet. It's OK to look for information online. But, remember that information on the Internet might be outdated, misleading, or wrong. It's best to talk to your healthcare providers about your questions so you can get the most helpful information.

## **Ask your healthcare providers to repeat things**

It's very helpful to ask your healthcare providers to re-explain or repeat things to you, if needed. One way to check if you understood your healthcare providers is to re-explain the information to them in your own words. This can help you better understand the information and make sure you understood it correctly.

## **Ask questions**

Health information can be confusing and sometimes overwhelming. It's common and OK to be confused or not understand information your healthcare providers give you. Taking steps to better understand your health information can improve your health literacy. One of the best ways to do this is to ask questions.

Ask your healthcare providers any questions you have. Be honest about things you don't understand or that you want more information about. It's also helpful to find out who you should contact if you have more questions after your visit and how you can reach them.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask your healthcare providers.

## Questions about your diagnosis

- What type of cancer do I have?
- Has my cancer spread? If it has, where?
- What's causing my symptoms?
- What are the best, worst, and most likely outcomes I should expect?

## Questions about treatment options

- Which type of treatment do you recommend? Why?
- What's the goal of the treatment? What are the risks and side effects?
- Are there any other treatments I could have? Is a clinical trial (research study) an option for me?
- How quickly do I have to decide about treatment?

## Questions to ask during treatment

- Where will I go for my treatment? How long will my overall treatment last?
- What should I do if I have new symptoms during treatment?
- What do I need to do after my treatments?

## Get ready before your appointments

Getting ready before your appointments can help you increase your health literacy during your appointments. Below are some ways you can get ready before your appointments.

- Write down all the medicine, vitamins, and supplements you take. Include both prescription and over-the-counter medicine (medicine you get without a prescription), patches, and creams. Write down the dose (amount) that you take of each medicine. Bring the list to your appointment.
- If you have a summary of your health history, bring it with you.
- Make a list of questions you have. Bring the list to your appointment so you can discuss them with your healthcare providers.

- Bring a notepad and pen so you can take notes. Write down instructions, tips, and any other information that could be helpful.
- Bring a family member, caregiver, or friend to your appointments. They can help you remember things and learn along with you. This can make it easier for them to help you with your care.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

---

About Health Literacy - Last updated on October 1, 2024

All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center