PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

About Health Literacy

This information explains what health literacy is. It also explains why health literacy matters and what you can do to build 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 not just about 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

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

But feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or worried can make it harder for you to learn and remember new things. This is

true even if you're usually comfortable understanding health information. That means your health literacy can change based on how worried you are or the situation you're in.

How can I build my health literacy?

We can help you learn and answer your questions. Good communication between you and your care team is one of the most important parts of health literacy.

We'll do our best to communicate with you in a way that's clear and easy to understand. You can help us by following these tips.

Think about how you learn best

People learn in different ways. For example, you may like to learn by reading. You may prefer to watch or listen to information. Or, you may like to learn by doing a hands-on activity, such as practicing an action.

If we understand how you like to learn, it can help us share information in the way that's best for you.

- If you know you learn best by reading text or watching videos, ask for a written resource or video about what you're learning. You can also search for educational resources yourself by visiting www.msk.org/pe, MSK's Patient and Caregiver Education website.

- If you learn best by listening, ask us to talk with you about what you need to know. It might also be helpful to ask for a written resource to take home. It can help you remember the things you talked about later.
- If you're learning an action (such as changing a bandage or taking off an at-home chemo pump), ask if you can practice during your appointment. We can show you how to do it, then watch while you do it yourself. We can also help you find a written resource or video to help you remember how to do it later.

Ask for an interpreter

Tell us if you're more comfortable using a language other than English. MSK offers free interpreters so you can use the language you're most comfortable with. They can help you in person, by phone, or by video call.

Many of MSK's educational resources are available in many languages. If we give you an educational resource in a language other than the one you like to use, ask if we have it in your language instead.

Think about what you want to know

Before your appointment, think about what you already know and what you want to learn. Make a list of what you want to talk about and any questions you have.

At the start of your appointment, you can tell us what you want to talk about. You can also tell us if you'd like general information, or if you want to know more details.

Looking for health information online

Many people search for health information on the Internet. It's OK to look for information online. But remember that information on the Internet can be outdated, misleading, or wrong.

Where you find health information matters. Read *How To Find Health Information You Can Trust* (www.mskcc.org/pe/find-information) to learn about finding trustworthy health information online. And remember, it's best to talk to your care team about your questions. We can help make sure you get the most helpful information.

Ask us to explain things differently

It's very helpful to ask us to repeat information or explain it another way, if needed. Health information can be confusing and sometimes overwhelming. It's common and OK not to understand something.

One of the best ways to check if you understood something is to explain it back to us in your own words. For example, you could say, "Can I repeat that back to make sure I got it right?" This can help you better understand the

information and make sure you understood it correctly.

Ask questions

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 us 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 and how you can reach them if you think of more questions after your visit.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask.

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 of the treatment?

- 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?
- What's my treatment schedule? 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 ahead of time can help you get the most out of your appointments. Here are some tips.

- **Write down your questions and things you want to talk about.** Bring the list to your appointment. This can help you remember everything you want to discuss with your care team.
- **Bring something to take notes.** Some people like using a notebook and pen. Others use their mobile phone or tablet. During your appointment, write down instructions, tips, and any other information that could be helpful.

- **Bring a family member, caregiver, or friend.** They can help you remember things and learn along with you. This can make it easier for them to help you with your care.
- **Bring your medicine list.** This is a list of all the medicines, vitamins, and supplements you take. Don't forget to include patches and creams. Include both prescription and over-the-counter medicines (medicines you get without a prescription). Write down the dose (amount) that you take of each medicine.
- **Bring a summary of your health history, if you have one.** This can help you focus on understanding new health information instead of remembering past health details.

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 to search our virtual library.

About Health Literacy - Last updated on September 11, 2026
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center