

Health Literacy and COVID-19: Approaches to Patient Communication

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This resource will review lessons learned about health communication during the pandemic and share strategies to address low literacy in under-resourced patient populations, including agricultural workers and older adults. Understanding how health literacy impacts health outcomes is crucial for health centers to provide accurate health information that is easy to understand, both verbally and through patient education materials.

According to [Healthy People 2030](#), **personal health literacy** refers to the patient's ability to find, understand, and use information and services to make health decisions for themselves and others. The COVID-19 public health crisis has shown how critical accurate health information is to reduce the spread of disease.¹

Misinformation related to COVID-19 can impact the health outcomes of vulnerable patient populations, such as agricultural workers and adults over the age of 65. Because of lower levels of health literacy, these under-resourced groups are already less likely to seek out preventive healthcare or adhere to a medication regimen.² Unclear or misleading messages related to COVID-19 prevention or treatment may also contribute to increased distrust in health providers, especially if patients have had previous negative experiences.

It is important to recognize the unique social risk factors older adults and agricultural workers face that negatively influence health literacy such as older age, limited education, and racial/ethnic minority status. These patient populations are more likely to experience a lack of access to resources and services that are vital to the prevention or treatment of both acute and chronic health conditions.³ Providers should ensure that health information is accessible to all patients, especially those at greater risk for health disparities.



For more resources related to addressing social risk factors for vulnerable patients, please visit:

- [Social Determinants of Health \(SDOH\) Resource Hub](#) (National Center for Farmworker Health, NCFH): Tools for screening, documenting, and assessing SDOH factors that impact the Migratory and Seasonal Agricultural Worker (MSAW) population
- [The Social Determinants of Health \(SDOH\) Academy](#): Virtual training series for health centers to develop, implement, and sustain SDOH interventions in their communities

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Health Literacy Lessons Learned During the Pandemic

In serving low health literacy populations (like agricultural workers and older adults) during COVID-19, the following lessons may be helpful:

- Maintain trust with patients by being transparent and truthful. Acknowledge any uncertainties and avoid minimizing risks or exaggerating the benefits.⁴
 - Share information and data about the risks of COVID-19 but also provide the known benefits and safety factors with vaccination.
- Trusted messengers or “ambassadors” are effective in reaching patient populations with concerns or doubts about a specific health topic.
 - Promotores de Salud or Community Health Workers (CHWs) in health centers are best for relaying health information since they are trusted community members who share similar beliefs and characteristics as the patients.⁵
- Use trusted sources for patient education materials. Decrease misinformation by sharing information that is reliable and evidence-based.⁶
 - The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has dependable information but should be adapted for low literacy levels as needed.
- Media resources continue to be widely utilized by patient populations to gather COVID-19 information, including traditional channels like newspaper or television, as well as social media platforms.⁷
 - Ask patients about their preferred sources of information to better understand their level of knowledge and how it may impact their health behaviors.



Find more health literacy resources below:

- [CDC - Health Literacy Resources](#)
- [HRSA - Health Literacy](#)
- [AHRQ - Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit](#)
- [Plain Language Action and Information Network \(PLAIN\)](#)
- [Institute for Healthcare Advancement \(IHA\) - Health Literacy Solutions Center](#)
- [Institute for Healthcare Improvement \(IHI\) - Ask Me 3](#)
- [Culturally Connected - Health Literacy and Cultural Humility Tools](#)

4. Chou, W.-Y.S. & Budenz, A. Considering Emotion in COVID-19 Vaccine Communication: Addressing Vaccine Hesitancy and Fostering Vaccine Confidence. *Health Communication*. 2020; 35 (14): 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1838096>

5. CDC. 12 COVID-19 Vaccination Strategies for Your Community. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Published September 10, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/vaccinate-with-confidence/community.html>

6. Petersen, M. B., Bor A Jorgensen, F., & Lindholt, M.F. Transparent communication about negative features of COVID-19 vaccines decreases acceptance but increases trust. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2021; 118 (29):e2024597118. [doi:10.1073/pnas.2024597118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2024597118).

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Communication Strategies for Low Health Literacy Populations

To address inequities related to social risk factors in agricultural workers, older adults, and other vulnerable populations, Health centers can utilize communication strategies to effectively advise their patient populations, especially those with lower health literacy. Below are two approaches to practice cross-cultural communication and engage patients when addressing health concerns, including COVID-19 testing and vaccination.

The **C.A.S.E. (Corroborate, About me, Science, Explain)** approach, a shared decision-making technique, can be used by Community Health Workers (CHWs) and Outreach Workers to maintain a professional and respectful tone when providing information to the public.

Corroborate

Recognize the person's concern, express understanding of potential doubt or hesitation.

About me

Share about your role as a health educator and how you have gathered information to help others understand this important topic.

Science

Provide evidenced-based data in a simplified way.

Explain

Explain your recommendations and encourage the patient to make an informed decision based on reliable data instead of feelings of uncertainty or fear.

The [C.A.S.E. Method for CHWs and Outreach Workers](#) educational video is available from NCFH to further explain this technique and how it can be incorporated into patient conversations.



Communication Strategies for Low Health Literacy Populations

The [L.E.A.R.N. Model](#) (Listen, Explain, Acknowledge, Recommend, and Negotiate) is another approach all Health center staff can use to support and improve patient engagement through cross-cultural communication.

Listen	Meet the patient where they are. Let them lead the conversation and listen with empathy. Elicit information with thoughtful, open-ended questions.
Explain	Provide the patient with verbal or written health information using plain, factual language.
Acknowledge	Create a comfortable, trusting space to allow for open dialogue. Encourage the patient to share or ask questions and acknowledge their concerns.
Recommend	Describe potential risks and benefits, potential side effects, and options for health care. Provide the reason for your recommendations.
Negotiate	Partner with the patient to ensure they are making an informed decision about their health. Clarify the roles of provider and patient in health care services.

Health communication strategies are not a “one size fits all” approach. Messaging should be tailored to your specific patient population, so information is accessible, easy to understand, and culturally appropriate.



National Center for Equitable Care for Elders

<https://ece.hsdm.harvard.edu>

National Center for Farmworker Health

<http://www.ncfh.org/>

