

Ask for health information you can understand

By Don McCormick*

Have you ever felt your doctor was talking “over your head?” How did you react? Did you nod your head, pretending to understand? Or did you just guess at the meaning of some words?

This happens sometimes and these are common reactions. But these days doctors, nurses, and other people in health care are actually trying to communicate better. They used to say things like, “Reduce your sodium intake to manage your hypertension.” Instead, many might now say “Cut down on salt to help your high blood pressure.”

Doctors who give you health information you can understand know it helps you take better care of yourself. Some might even use visual aids like pictures or models. This supports something called “health literacy.”

But communication is a two-way street. You’re the boss of your health. What can you do to make sure you understand the health information you get? Here are some tips:

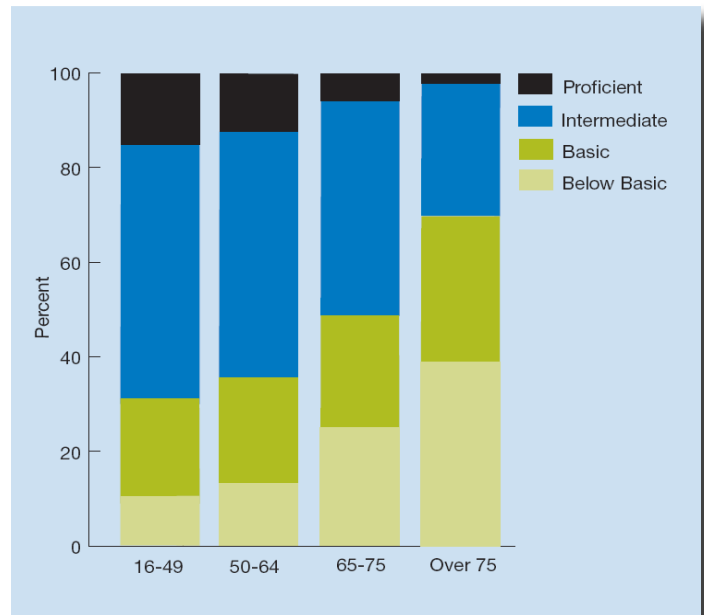
Ask Questions. Make a list before you go to the doctor. The Partnership for Clear Health Communication’s “Ask Me 3” project recommends you ask at least these three important questions.

What is my main problem?
What do I need to do?
Why is it important to do this?

You may have more questions. Ask as many as you need. Remember, you’re the boss. Leave the exam only after you understand all the information you need to make the right health decisions.

Speak up. Tell the doctor when you don’t understand. As the boss of your health, you have the right to ask him to repeat things or say them differently.

Use “teach-back.” After your health care provider gives you instructions, repeat them back to her in your own words. This is called teach-back. For example, say “O.k., I think you are telling me to _____, right?” If you are right, your provider will say so. If you misunderstood, she will make sure you get it right.



According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 53% of adults in the U.S. have only “intermediate” health literacy. Also, health literacy decreases with age.

Ask for more information. As the boss of your health, you have a lot to think about. You will need to make the right health decisions long after leaving the doctor’s office. Ask for a good Web site, hotline number, or brochure about your health problem.

When you find health information difficult, it’s important to remember you’re not alone. About 88 percent of adults in the U.S. lack “proficient” health literacy skills. This is a big problem. Failure to understand or get the right health information can cause medication errors, more trips to the emergency room, wrong diagnoses and other problems. Each year, low health literacy in the U.S. accounts for up to 17 percent of all health care costs—up to \$238 billion!

Be the boss of your health. Ask questions, speak up, use teach-back and ask for more information. Also make sure to find a doctor who supports your health literacy. Now that’s really being the boss!

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