Creating Educational Materials for Patients with Low Literacy Levels

Carol Page, PT, CHT; Hand Therapy Center, Rehabilitation Department, Hospital for Special Surgery, New York, NY

Introduction

The Issue

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy determined:
- Approximately 80 million adults (13%) lack basic skills, including reading, writing, and arithmetic.
- Approximately 40 million adults (6%) lack high school level skills, including reading and mathematics.
- 

Who Is Affected?

Adults with low literacy are found throughout all aspects of the population. Even those not working with subliterate tasks and training programs are at risk.

Educational Materials

Most patient education materials are written at the 12th grade level or lower, which is too high for many patients. A 4th grade level would be more appropriate for many patient populations.

Possible Signs of Low Literacy and Illiteracy

- The splint supports your wrist and the base of your thumb to rest your inflamed tendons.
- To immobilize the wrist and the base of the thumb for complete rest of the inflamed tendons.
- The splint should be worn all the time, including at night, to prevent movement of the tendons.
- It should be removed for bathing or showering.
- It can be worn for 10-15 minutes per day to provide cold therapy.
- It should be worn as long as there is pain or swelling.
- It should be removed to apply warm therapy.
- It should be discarded when it becomes inadequate or damaged.

Tips for Creating Easy-to-Read Materials

- Choose a simple and familiar language.
- Use short sentences and simple prepositions.
- Use active voice and present tense.
- Use a clear and concise format.
- Use a simple and white space.
- Include white space.

Determining Readability of Educational Materials

- Grades 9 through 12 are considered high school level, appropriate for patients with low literacy skills.
- However, difficulty extends to the 8th grade level, high for patients with low literacy skills.

Clinical Relevance

The patient education handout used in the hand therapy center is in the 7th grade level, appropriate for patients with low literacy skills.

How to Recognize Literacy Problems

- Review the literacy issues of the issue.
- The need for literacy information is extensive, including reading, writing, and arithmetic.
- The gap between literacy levels and the readability of patient education materials has been identified as an important healthcare issue.

Possible Signs of Low Literacy and Illiteracy

- Poor comprehension and retention of information
- Consisting of relatively simple content
- Making sense of the material, e.g. “I forget to put on my glasses”
- Bringing someone who can read to appointments
- Difficulty or avoidance of reading
- Confusion or frustration when reading

Investigation

- The issue
- The need for literacy information
- The gap between literacy levels and the readability of patient education materials

Recognizing Literacy Problems

This widespread problem is difficult to recognize.

Most people with low literacy experience feelings of shame, blame, and helplessness.

References

3. Scoring was performed with the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level program in Microsoft Word. This scoring formula is based on the premise that the greater average number of syllables per word and words per sentence, the greater reading difficulty.