

# HEALTH LITERACY IN THE NEW NORMAL: MEANINGFUL WAYS TO ENGAGE YOUR PATIENTS

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## ▸ INTRODUCTION

# Why Health Literacy Is More Important Now than Ever

Approximately 80 million Americans have limited health literacy, which puts them at greater risk for poorer health outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Yet evidence strongly supports that empowering patients with resources to make informed health decisions can lead to better health outcomes.

The events of recent months have highlighted the vital need for education that helps patients take an active role in managing their health. In the “new normal” forged by the current pandemic, patients now expect their clinicians to use a wider digital front door to deliver more meaningful, accurate, and personalized information. The goal of the clinician is to guide patients in protecting their health, as well as the health of their loved ones and communities.

By providing easily understood learner-centered patient education, hospitals and health systems can improve health literacy, support shared decision-making, and enhance the patient experience and outcomes.

**80** MILLION

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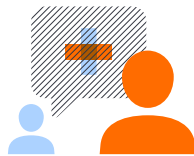
## Lessons from COVID-19

COVID-19 has revealed how inaccurate, unreliable health information and myths can spread fast and easily in times of crises — when accurate health information is even more critical than usual.

It takes time for scientists to understand newly identified viruses, bacteria, and conditions. Researchers must discover how they spread, who's susceptible, and treatment options.

COVID-19 illustrates how rapidly clinical evidence and information can evolve. To stay updated, patients often turn to readily available online information sources — many of which are not reliable or current. That means people may miss key details, receive inaccurate information, or uncover contradictory findings — all of which can lead to confusion, fear, frustration, or harmful health outcomes.

The pandemic at hand has taught us the significance of accurate patient education. But additionally, it has demonstrated that accuracy alone is not enough. The information must be clear, understandable, and meaningful for each patient before it can help achieve better outcomes.



# Patient Education Challenges

Most patients welcome health information from their clinicians. The real challenge for clinicians, then, is to steer their patients toward the most reliable, evidence-based, and current education available.

Moreover, clinicians must ensure that the education they provide is understandable, relevant, and used by patients and their caregivers.

In fast-evolving situations, even commonly searched websites sites can lead to outdated or untrustworthy materials. Going outside of a healthcare organization's patient education presents some sizeable risks:



**Risks to patients  
if different clinicians  
offer conflicting  
information**



**Risks to the healthcare  
organization if a clinician  
delivers inaccurate  
information to patients**

Conversely, clinicians who use education that meets patients wherever they are on their care journey can help raise patients' health literacy level and activate them in their care with actionable steps toward better health.





## The Benefits of Health Literacy

Patients with higher health literacy tend to follow their clinicians' care plans more accurately and make informed decisions better than those with low health literacy. They tend to seek care in the most appropriate way to stay as healthy as possible, which helps reduce the spread of contagious illnesses such as COVID-19 while preventing unnecessary healthcare resource utilization.

Research finds that patients activated in their care engage more often in:

- + Preventive behaviors
- + Information-seeking behaviors
- + Healthy behaviors
- + Disease-specific self-management behaviors<sup>2</sup>



# 12.5%

fewer hospital admissions<sup>3</sup>

# 5.3%

lower overall medical costs<sup>3</sup>

Health literate patients often clarify information and calm others as well, which can help dispel myths and fear in times of crisis.

## ▸ STEP 1

# Take a Learner-Centered Approach

To improve health literacy, patients need simple access to relevant information.

To start, that requires providing patients with high-quality, evidence-based education from a reliable and trusted source.

Equally imperative is ensuring that the patient education your clinicians are providing is learner-centric. Education must be:

- + **Written or spoken in clear and simple terms**
- + **Developed using plain language principles — no jargon or clichés**
- + **Written or spoken at or below the 8th-grade level**
- + **Delivered in the user's preferred language**
- + **Delivered in the user's preferred format and learning style (e.g., reading written content, or watching/listening to video content)**



Together, these components make the information engaging and understandable for patients.



## STEP 2

# Deliver Relevant, Actionable Education

Even the most engaging and understandable patient education won't drive better outcomes unless it's also actionable. Ultimately, great patient education tells users what they need to know to care for themselves and their loved ones.

Through technology, we can give patients useful information that's personalized to their individual needs. It can be tailored to their:



**Most recent and relevant conditions, medications, and procedures**



**Preferred digital delivery method (e.g., via patient portal, attached to the after-visit summary, or via SMS text message)**

Mobile-optimized education delivered directly to patients' preferred personal devices offers timely access to actionable information. When videos and text-based education are easily available at home, patients and their caregivers can reference them whenever they have questions. This type of education supports not just the patient, but the caregivers who are supporting the patient — raising health literacy levels for everyone.



### STEP 3

## Increase Engagement Through Analytics

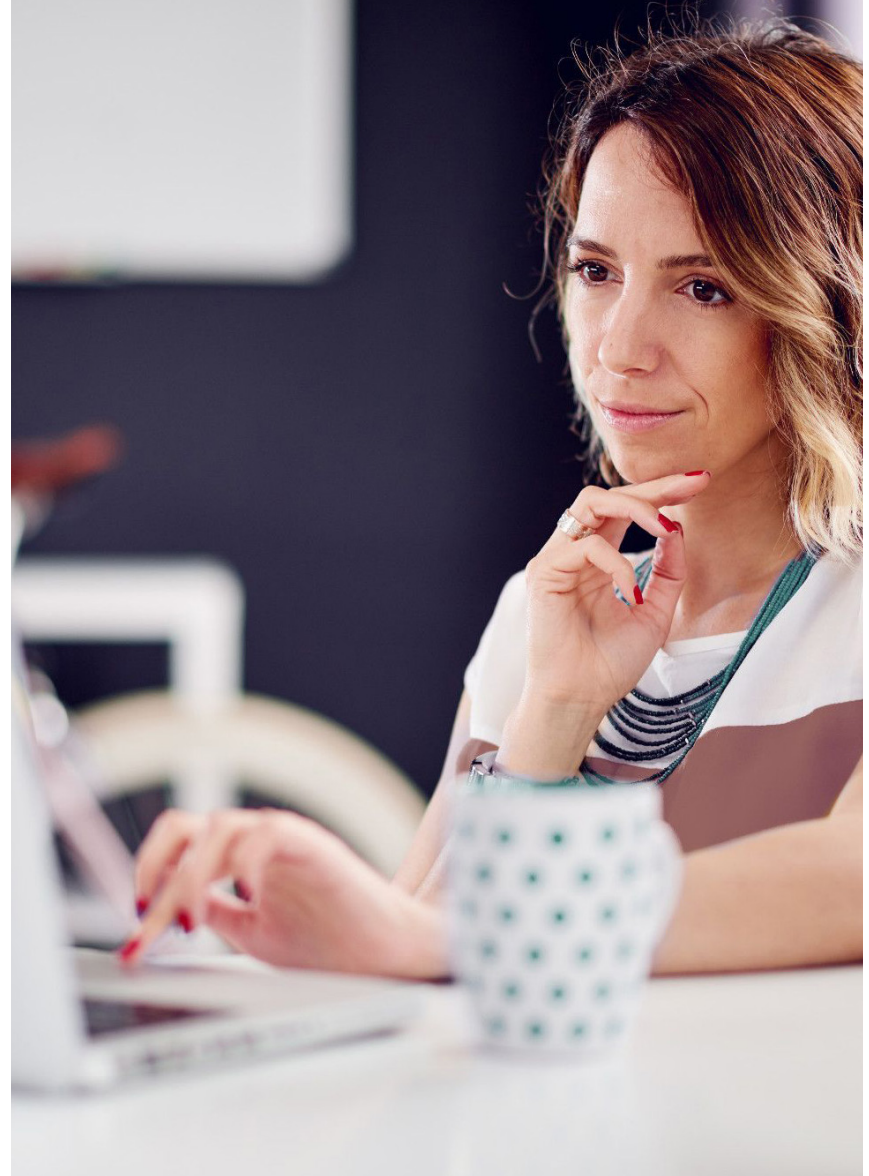
A key benefit of digital patient education can be described in one word: Insight.

A digital patient education platform can show when education has been assigned to any given patient by clinicians across the care continuum. It can also give clinicians visibility into which information was actually consumed. By enabling a feedback loop, digital platforms can further measure whether patients truly understand the education provided.

Data and analytics that track how patients interact with education materials — what they use, what they like, what they don't like, etc. — allow clinicians to adjust education as needed for optimal impact. With deeper insight into the education their patients use, clinicians can hold more informed conversations with them, support shared decision-making, and increase the likelihood of care plan adherence to drive better outcomes.



**Personalized, actionable education should reflect not only each patient's unique preferences and health literacy level, but also where they are on their care journey.**





## Embracing Health Literacy in the New Digital World

Evidence shows that improving health literacy can improve patient outcomes. Conversely, COVID-19 illustrates how easily people with low health literacy can fall prey to health misinformation — with potentially tragic consequences.

In the wake of COVID-19, patient education is evolving as quickly as healthcare itself. We must seize the opportunity to safeguard patients by helping to raise health literacy levels. By engaging patients with evidence-based, learner-centered education at every encounter, at every access point across the care continuum, we can help patients make more informed decisions about their care and achieve better outcomes. Healthcare organizations can leverage a digital patient education platform to arm themselves with the actionable insights needed to effectively close the feedback loop and achieve better outcomes.



To learn more about effectively educating and empowering patients to engage in their care in the new digital world, visit [Elsevier.com/patientpass](https://www.elsevier.com/patientpass)

- 1 Berkman ND, Sheridan SL, Donahue KE, et al. Low Health Literacy and Health Outcomes: An Updated Systematic Review. *Ann Intern Med.* 2011 Jul 19;155(2):97-107. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21768583/>. Accessed June 25, 2020.
- 2 Hibbard JH, Greene J. What The Evidence Shows About Patient Activation: Better Health Outcomes And Care Experiences; Fewer Data On Costs. *HealthAffairs.* February 2013. Vol. 32, No. 2. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2012.1061>. Accessed June 25, 2020.
- 3 Hibbard JH, Greene J, Overton V. Patients With Lower Activation Associated With Higher Costs; Delivery Systems Should Know Their Patients' 'Scores'. *HealthAffairs.* February 2013. Vol. 32, No. 2. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2012.1064>. Accessed June 25, 2020.

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