



## 4.3 Health literacy

Australians are encouraged to actively participate in maintaining their health. Health literacy can influence how much and how effectively people do this. It has two major components (ACSQHC 2014a):

- **Individual health literacy** is about a person's ability to access, understand and apply health information; for example, to complete health care forms or navigate the health care system.
- The **health literacy environment** describes the infrastructure, people, policies and relationships of the health care system. Aspects of the health literacy environment include patient referral pathways, coordination of care, and hospital design.

### Why is health literacy important?

Health literacy plays a part in the safety and quality of health care. It can influence decisions people make, such as how often to take medication, when to access health care services, and which services to access. Low individual health literacy can be associated with higher rates of hospitalisation and emergency care use, sometimes indicating poor management of health conditions outside the hospital system (Bush et al. 2010).

Low levels of health literacy are also associated with undesirable outcomes, such as premature death among older people, lower participation in preventative programs (including influenza vaccination and cervical and breast cancer screening) (Berkman et al. 2011), and poor medication adherence (Diug et al. 2011). As health systems are becoming increasingly complex, health literacy is becoming more important.

### How health literate are Australians?

In 2006, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted a Health Literacy Survey. Respondents were asked to complete a range of tasks designed to test their understanding of health promotion, health protection, disease prevention and management, and navigation of the health system. Responses indicated that only 41% of adult Australians had a level of health literacy that would allow them to meet the complex demands of everyday life (ABS 2009).

A person's health literacy can be influenced by their cultural beliefs, language, disability, education, income and health status (Sørensen et al. 2012). For example, the ABS survey showed that health literacy was lower in people who speak English as a second language (26%) and higher in people who have completed a Bachelor degree or higher (70%). Health literacy was also higher among people with high incomes (63%) than among people on low incomes (21%) (ABS 2009).

See Chapter 1.4 'Indicators of Australia's health' for more information on health literacy as an indicator.





Limited information is available on the health literacy environment. The ABS Survey of Health Care 2016 (ABS 2017) did not directly measure health literacy but contained some relevant questions. Analysis revealed that 95% of respondents reported that their specialist doctor explained treatment choices in a way that they could understand, and 88% reported that their general practitioner usually or always involved them in decisions about their own health care. Shared decision making by the provider and patient is needed for effective communication.

See Chapter 7.18 'Coordination of health care' for more information on the ABS Survey of Health Care.

## How can health literacy be improved?

In 2014, all Australian health ministers endorsed the 'National statement on health literacy' (ACSQHC 2014b) developed by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (the Commission). The statement proposed a coordinated approach to improve the health literacy of Australians across three areas:

1. Incorporate health literacy into health care systems; for example, through legislation, policies, plans, standards, funding mechanisms and educational curriculums.
2. Improve communication of health information between providers and users, including interpersonal communication, written information and health promotion campaigns.
3. Include health literacy in the education of adults, children and health care providers.

Several national initiatives relating to one or more of these areas are underway (Box 4.3.1).

### Box 4.3.1 Initiatives to improve health literacy

The Commission and Healthdirect Australia have developed 'Question builder', an online tool for patients to prepare for a medical appointment. It allows patients to select questions they want to ask at the appointment and prepare for questions the doctor may ask them. This allows the patient to be more involved in their own health care and improves their ability to make informed decisions (ACSQHC 2017a).

The Commission also released 'Top tips for safe health care', a booklet that provides information about what people should consider when interacting with the health system, such as finding good information, asking about care after leaving hospital and giving feedback (ACSQHC 2017b).

'Choosing Wisely Australia' is an initiative of NPS MedicineWise; it is based on 'Choosing Wisely', developed by the ABIM Foundation in the United States.

'Choosing Wisely Australia' includes strategies to encourage and empower people to communicate effectively with their doctor. It provides evidential information on different options to help patients avoid unnecessary tests, treatments and procedures, and better understand their options (NPS MedicineWise 2016).





## What is missing from the picture?

Health literacy is a broad and complex concept that is difficult to measure. As outlined in this snapshot, there are limited Australian data available on health literacy (related to the individual or environment). The last national survey measuring health literacy was conducted more than a decade ago, in 2006 (ABS 2009). The ABS will conduct another similar survey in 2018, following up respondents from the 2017–18 National Health Survey.

While there is evidence to inform the improvement of some aspects of health literacy, work has yet to be finished in creating a common measurement scale to evaluate the effectiveness of new strategies. Further work to develop suitable performance measures and identify the most appropriate data to collect would be useful.

## Where do I go for more information?

More information on health literacy and safety and quality in health care is available on the Commission's website <[www.safetyandquality.gov.au](http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au)>.

Information on the Choosing Wisely initiative is available on the [Choosing Wisely](http://www.choosingwisely.org.au) website.

Information on the Question Builder initiative is available on the [Health Direct](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au) website.

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