

# Health and Well-Being

## Health Literacy Can Protect You And Your Family From Dangerous Errors

(NAPSA)—If you’ve ever left a doctor’s office or a pharmacy with less than crystal-clear information, you aren’t alone. According to the Institute of Medicine, more than 90 million adults have difficulty reading and understanding the instructions on prescriptions or medicine bottles, appointment slips, informed consent documents, insurance forms and health educational materials. In other words, it’s not at all uncommon to struggle with “health literacy.”

Certain segments of the population are more at risk than others, such as the elderly or the poor, but you can’t tell by looking. Doctors’ orders, pharmacy directions and insurance company policies can be confusing, regardless of your background—and the consequences of not understanding can be dangerous or even deadly. It can lead to everything from longer hospital stays and higher costs to serious medical errors.

The good news is that you can improve your health literacy. The Partnership for Clear Health Communication, for example, recommends that you always ask the following three questions of your health care provider:

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

If you don’t understand the answers to these questions the first time, ask them again until you do understand.

“Your health care professionals want to help you,” explained Dr. Lisa Weaver, vice president overseeing clinical strategy at Humana, one of the country’s largest health benefits companies. “Help them help you by asking these



**The more you know about your own health, the better you may feel—and heeding a few hints can help.**

questions and by making sure the doctor has explained everything in a way you understand. It’s no coincidence that there is a direct connection between health literacy and the quality of the care you receive.”

In other words, you can improve your health simply by being an active participant in your health care. This includes understanding how to take your medicines, keeping your appointments and following up as appropriate.

Some other ways to increase your health literacy include:

- Taking a pad and pencil with you to your appointment. That way, you can write down your doctor’s directions and make sure that you ask any questions that are on your mind.
- Taking a friend or family member with you to your appointment. That person may remember

things you don’t or ask questions you don’t think to ask.

- Bringing a list of all your medicines with you when visiting a health care professional. Multiple prescriptions can become confusing and one doctor might not know what the other is prescribing. For this reason, Humana provides its members with a “Smart Summary” statement that includes a description and picture of each pill the member takes. It is excellent for sharing with the doctor.

- Seeking out independent sources of information on your diagnosis. If you have Internet access, there is a wealth of information available to help you learn about your condition and even connect with others who have it. One Web site that provides health care information in an easy-to-understand manner is [www.wellzone.org](http://www.wellzone.org), sponsored by The Humana Foundation.