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Physical education

Ask the right questions and improve your health literacy

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Odds are that if you're reading this, you're not illiterate.

But you could be struggling with health literacy. You may not even know exactly what health literacy is.

It's essential to your well-being, though, says Dr. Javier Sevilla, an assistant professor of family medicine at the Indiana University School of Medicine. "It's the degree to which an individual has the capacity to not only obtain but also process and understand basic health information needed to make appropriate health decisions," says Sevilla.

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that fewer than one in six people are proficient in health literacy. About 22 percent of adults have basic health literacy, and 14 percent are at or below the level of basic health literacy.

While people who have language problems can also have trouble with health literacy, they are not alone, experts say. Even people for whom English is the first language can misunderstand instructions, says Michael Villaire, director of programs and operations for the Institute for Healthcare Advancement.

Consider a pill bottle with instructions to take two a day. Do you take both at once or at different times? If that bottle instructs you to swallow the pill whole, do you crush it and take it all at once, figuring that's the whole pill?

Surveys show that about half of all people misunderstand prescription instructions, Villaire says. Even people familiar with medical-speak may have math difficulties, he says.

Say your 10-year-old develops a cough and you want to give him or her medicine. The children's cough medicine bottle contains a chart, telling you how much to give according to age and weight. Can you determine the proper dose for your child?

Lack of health literacy can be costly, not only on an individual but also on a societal basis. A University of Connecticut study released in October estimated that the impact of health illiteracy on the economy ranges from \$106 billion to \$236 billion a year.

It can also compromise patient safety.

"One of the root causes of unanticipated events in the system is communication breakdowns," says Diane Pinakiewicz, president of the National Patient Safety Foundation.

Improving health literacy may also persuade patients to improve their overall health, says Harlon Wilson, president of Medical Animatics, an Indianapolis-based company that produces health education videos.

"You've got to understand to make more informed choices," says Wilson.

Medical Animatics creates interactive videos that walk patients through procedures, such as Lasik eye surgery or bariatric surgery. The patients answer questions as they watch, which can tell the doctor whether they comprehend the situation.

But the single most important thing one can do to improve one's health literacy, experts agree, is to ask questions.

"Don't worry about whether people think you're smart or not in understanding health information. It's hard for everyone," says Dr. Darren DeWalt, an assistant professor of medicine at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. "Leave your ego at the door. It's your health that's at stake here."