



Health Literacy in Pharmacy Practice:

Building Understanding and Confidence in Everyday Pharmacy Consultations

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Adult Literacy for Life

Education

- ETBs
- NALA
- Community Education Providers

Health & Family

- Family Resource Centres
- Community mental health services
- GPs
- Pharmacies

Information

- Citizens information Services
- Money Advice and Budgeting Service
- Libraries
- BAI Media Literacy initiatives



Digital

- Broadband roll out including the National Broadband Plan
- Digital Skills for Citizens
- MyGov.ie
- Strategic Connection Points

Community Development

- SICAP Funded Partnership Companies & Bodies
- Local authorities
- Community Services Programme
- Sporting associations

Employment

- Intreo
- EmployAbility
- Community Workplace Schemes
- Employers
- Trade Unions



ADULT LITERACY FOR LIFE

A 10-YEAR ADULT LITERACY, NUMERACY AND DIGITAL LITERACY STRATEGY



[adult-literacy-for-life-strategy.pdf](#)
([adultliteracyforlife.ie](#))



- Whole of government and society initiative
- Partnership across agencies
- Creating a more **literacy-aware** society
- More connected accessible system for people with unmet literacy needs

Scale of the challenge ...

PIAAC 2012



18% of adults surveyed are at level 1 or below in literacy
(PIAAC 2012)



25% of adults surveyed are at level 1 or below in numeracy
(PIAAC 2012)



42% of adults surveyed are at level 1 or below in problem solving in technology rich environments
(PIAAC 2012)

PIAAC 2023



21% of adults surveyed are at level 1 or below in literacy
(PIAAC 2023)



25% of adults surveyed are at level 1 or below in numeracy
(PIAAC 2023)



28% of adults surveyed are at level 1 or below in adaptive problem solving
(PIAAC 2023)

In numbers

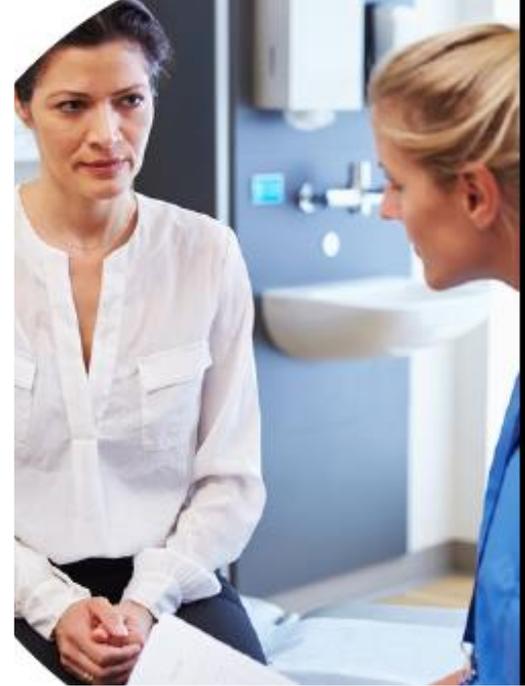
- Over 700,000 adults living with an unmet literacy need
- Over 835,000 adults living with an unmet numeracy need
- Over 935,000 adults without basic digital skills (DESI, 2023)
- 326,000 adults aged 25-64 in Ireland have less than a QQI L4 qualification (equivalent to a Leaving Certificate)
- Over 260,000 of these adults are in employment

What is Health Literacy?

The ability to:

- **Find** relevant health information
- **Understand** what that information means
- **Evaluate** whether it is trustworthy, relevant and helpful
- **Use it** to make decisions about their health

These decisions can involve managing a health condition, preventing illness, and making healthy lifestyle choices.





Vaccines to protect against HPV, MenACWY and Tdap

Information for parents and students in First year of secondary school



HE Menu ▾ 🔍

[Home](#) > [Health A to Z](#)

Common illnesses

A lot of everyday illnesses like colds, coughs or sore throats don't need an antibiotic. Find out how you can treat them at home and when to get help.

<p>Sore throat</p> <p>Find out what you can take to make you feel better with a sore throat ></p>	<p>Common cold</p> <p>How to treat a cold and tips to avoid catching one ></p>	<p>Cough</p> <p>Find out what causes a cough, how to treat it and when to see a GP ></p>
<p>Flu</p> <p>Find out the symptoms of flu and how a flu vaccine can protect you ></p>	<p>Earache</p> <p>Learn about the symptoms and treatment of earache ></p>	<p>Diarrhoea and vomiting</p> <p>Advice on treatment and how to avoid spreading infection ></p>
<p>Rash</p> <p>Find out the symptoms and causes of rash ></p>	<p>High temperature - fever in children</p> <p>Find out what you can ></p>	<p>Fever in adults</p> <p>A high temperature can be a sign that you are ></p>

Health numeracy?

Health numeracy means understanding numbers in a health setting — like test results, risks, or medication doses. Many people find this hard.

This includes the ability to:

- **Understand risks** such as 1 in 100, 20% increase
- **Read** graphs or charts such as the BMI chart
- **Work out** medication doses and times

Many people struggle with numbers. This can affect their decisions relating to their healthcare.

What can help? Plain language, design, diagrams, icons, images, and colour.



Dosage:

Adults:

Initially 15ml three times a day,
reducing to 10ml three times
daily when a satisfactory
response is obtained.

How clear is this dosage instruction?

Types of Health Literacy





Why Health Literacy matters?

Michael Power: Literacy Ambassador

The impact of health
literacy needs



SOLAS
learning works



Health literacy needs in Ireland

Research shows that 28% of adults in Ireland have limited health literacy. This is over 1 million people.

Limited health literacy can mean that people:

- Are not using or getting the best out of the health services.
- Have less understanding about their own health and treatment.
- End up needing to go to their doctor and emergency services more often

Source: Department of Health (2024). Results from European Health Literacy Population Survey 2019 - 2021



Research on health literacy

Omnibus survey, November 2023



17% of adults in Ireland **understand little information** from their GP (doctor), nurse or pharmacist.

Embarrassment was the main reason for not asking for explanation (42%).



33% of people would **only sometimes ask GP (doctor), nurse or pharmacist to explain** when they do not understand.

38% of people have taken the **wrong dose** of medication at least once.



Source: SOLAS Adult Literacy for Life (2023).
Omnibus survey results from Coyne Research

Comparing data with similar survey in 2015

Results in 2023 from Omnibus survey	Results in 2015 from NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) survey
17% of adults in Ireland understand little information from their GP (family doctor), nurse or pharmacist.	5% of Irish people understand little information from their healthcare person.
33% of people would only sometimes ask GP (family doctor), nurse or pharmacist to explain when they do not understand.	17% of people would only sometimes ask GP (family doctor), nurse or pharmacist to explain when they do not understand.
Embarrassment was the main reason for not asking for explanation (42%).	Embarrassment was the main reason for not asking for explanation (24%).
38% of people have taken the wrong dose of medication at least once.	17% of people have taken the wrong dose of medication at least once.



Some emerging changes in pharmacy



HSE Health App



In Ireland:

- **33% don't always ask questions** when they don't understand
- **38% have taken the wrong dose of medication** at least once

“Understanding is not automatic — even when instructions are clear to us.”



Everyday Health Literacy Moments in Pharmacy

Common moments where understanding can break down:

“Take twice daily” interpreted differently

Antibiotics stopped when symptoms improve

OTC medicines chosen without full understanding

Patients saying “yes” but unsure

Complex medicine changes after discharge

“These are not patient failures — they are system issues that can be addressed by adopting health literacy friendly approaches.”

Some tips and tools



Adult
Literacy
for Life



Recognise the signs



Excuses for
not writing

Reluctant to
fill forms

Poor health
awareness

Not knowing
own
medication

Forgot my
glasses!

Body
language

Mistrust of the
health system

Some top tips

1. Communicate clearly using plain language	2. Being aware and using a literacy friendly approach	3. Use check for understanding tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Can someone understand what you mean the first time they hear or read it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ What to look out for and how to respond✓ Universal precautions approach✓ Literacy friendly quality standards	<p>Did you ask the person to repeat back information or instructions in their own words?</p>



1.
Communicate
using plain
language

What is plain language?

Plain Language is a way of writing and presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it.

Original: "Take two tablets twice per day"
79% of people understood

Plain Language: "Take two tablets at breakfast and two at bedtime"
97% of people understood

Further training:

[News and
Events - NALA](#)



Using pictures can enhance health understanding

DON'T
FEAR THE
SMEAR

2nd Cervical cancer is the second most common female cancer in Europe

 Cervical screening can prevent up to 80% of cervical cancers

A smear test is quick, easy and painless

It could save your life



Marie Keating
FOUNDATION



About **300** women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in Ireland each year

However, regular smear tests can help prevent the disease by detecting abnormalities which do not have symptoms

Free smear tests

CervicalCheck offers free smear tests to women aged 25 to 60

 <p>Smear tests take cells from the neck of the womb</p>	 <p>Regular smear tests are free</p>	 <p>Pick any of the +4,500 registered GPs or nurses</p>
 <p>It takes less than five minutes</p>	 <p>Most test results are normal</p>	 <p>Check when your next smear test is at CervicalCheck.ie</p>

Where your cervix is



Symptoms of cervical cancer

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding between periods, after sex or after menopause
- Unusual and/or unpleasant vaginal discharge
- Discomfort or pain in your pelvis
- Discomfort, pain or bleeding during or after sex
- Lower back pain

Pre-cancerous cells and early cervical cancer may not have any symptoms which is why going for regular smear tests is so important.

Reducing your risk

 <p>Have regular smear tests every 3-5 years</p>	 <p>Don't smoke</p>
 <p>Practice safe sex</p>	 <p>Make sure your daughter gets the HPV vaccine</p>

For more information...

visit www.mariekeating.ie



2. Be aware
and use a
literacy friendly
approach

Universal precautions approach

Using a **universal precautions** approach means treating all patients as if they are at risk of not understanding health information.

When health care providers use this approach, they acknowledge that:

You can't accurately identify who understands and who doesn't.

Health literacy is situational. Even individuals with good health literacy skills may sometimes have trouble understanding health information — especially when they're sick, frightened, or in pain.

Everyone benefits from clear, actionable information.

Reference: [Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#)

More information in: [AHRQ Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit](#)



Universal Precautions Approach



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for Life**



3. Check for understanding

Check for understanding: Use teach-back

Teach-back is a way to confirm that people understand what you have said.

Steps:

- After you explain information or instructions, ask the person to repeat it back in their own words.
- Sometimes all it takes is the question: ‘What are you going to do when you get home?’

Short video here: <https://bit.ly/2nWRqSZ>

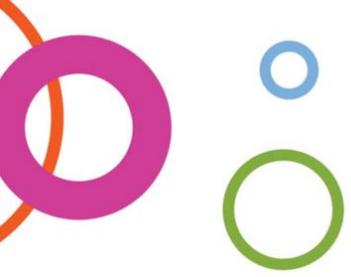
10 minute talk from Graham Kramer <https://bit.ly/3o7SJ39>

“Just so I can check I’ve explained things clearly, can you tell me what you’ve understood?”

“There’s a lot to take in. What are you going to say to your partner when you get home?”

Let's look at teach back in action





Every time you talk with a health care provider

ASK THESE 3 QUESTIONS

1

**What is
my main
problem?**

2

**What do
I need
to do?**

3

**Why is it
important
for me to
do this?**

Tips on improving personal health literacy



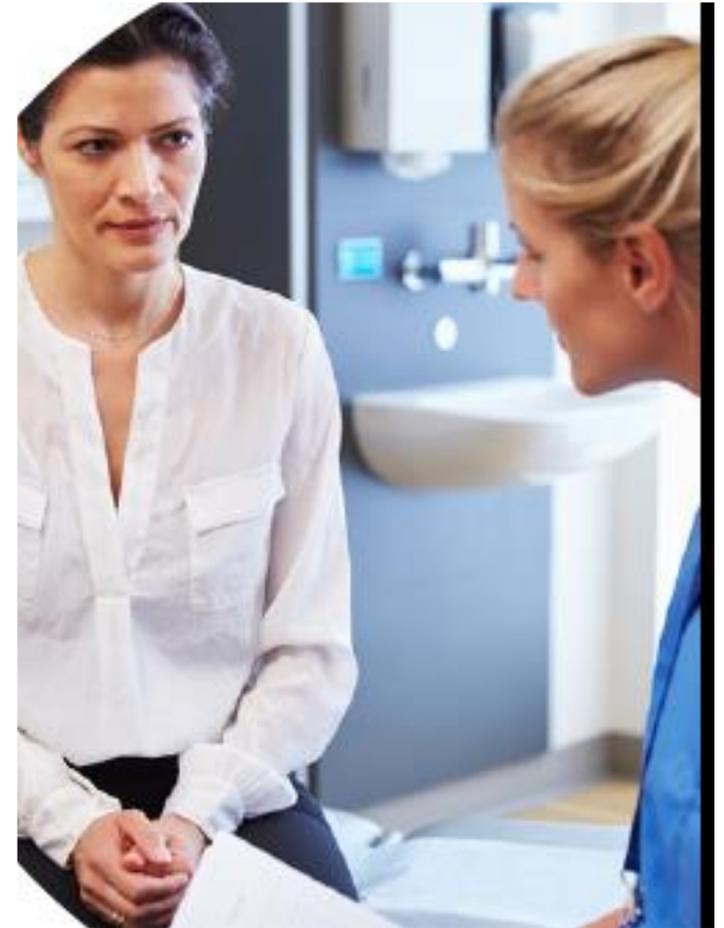
The Pharmacy Story — “Yes, I Understand”

A pharmacist was counselling a patient who had just started a new antibiotic. She explained clearly: “Take one tablet twice daily for seven days.” The patient nodded, smiled, and said, “Yes, I understand.”

A few days later, the patient returned — the infection hadn’t improved. When the pharmacist gently explored what happened, the patient explained they had been taking **both tablets together in the morning**, because they thought “twice daily” meant two tablets at once.

Nothing was wrong with the medicine; the issue was understanding.

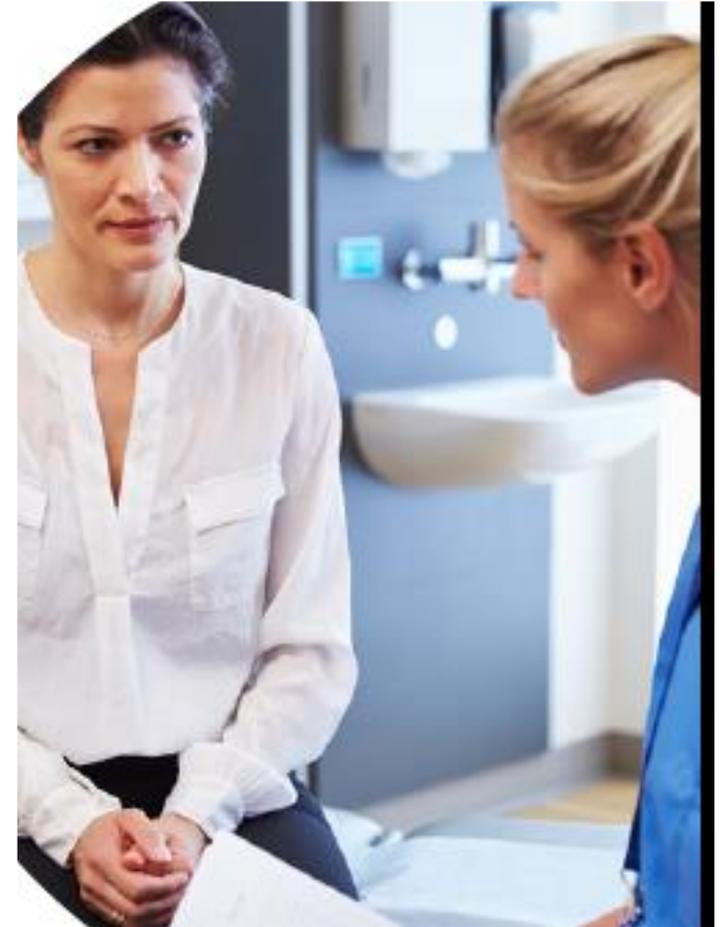
When the pharmacist changed how she explained it, linking doses to breakfast and evening meal, the patient completed the treatment correctly and improved.



Three small changes you can make

- 1 Slow down the first instruction**
→ One key message first.
- 2 Check understanding naturally**
→ “Just so I know I explained that clearly...”
- 3 Connect instructions to daily life**
→ Meals, routines, habits instead of clinical language.

“When pharmacies do this consistently, we move toward becoming health-literacy-friendly services”.



My Medicines List

Information for
people who take
medicines and
their families

My Medicines List

- My Medicines List is for people who take medicines and their families, as part of the Know Check Ask medication safety campaign.
- Can be ordered on the healthpromotion.ie website, translated into 52 languages

My medicines



My allergies and how I react:

Name	Date of birth	Date I filled out this form				
Name of medicine or supplement	Strength	How much I take each time	I take it	I take it every day (Yes / No)	Why I take it?	My notes
Example: ABC Tablets	25mg	2 tablets	Once in the morning	Yes	For my heart	Take with food

Making it happen

Five steps to becoming a literacy friendly organisation

Appendices

Appendix 1 Literacy friendly quality standards

NALA has developed ten literacy friendly quality standards:

Communications	
1	Our staff use plain English when speaking with people.
2	We use plain English in our written information .
3	We check that people understand what we have told them.
4	The layout of our office/reception is clear.
Staff awareness and responding sensitively	
5	Our staff are aware of literacy friendly work practices.
6	Our staff respond sensitively to the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of people.
Policies and procedures	
7	We have a literacy friendly policy .
8	We have specific ways to help people find and use important information and instructions.
9	We support our staff to improve their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.
Evaluating and improving	
10	We regularly evaluate and continually improve our literacy friendly service.



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Literacy friendly check

[NALA Making it Happen: Five steps to becoming a literacy friendly organisation](#)



www.adultliteracyforlife.ie/aware



Free course

Let's talk about literacy

A course to help you become literacy aware and respond sensitively to unmet literacy needs.

- 📺 **Delivery** Online
- 👤 **Who is this course for** People who deal with the public
- 🕒 **Length of course** 45 minutes

[View course >](#)



Free course

Let's talk about health literacy

A course to introduce health literacy.

- 📺 **Delivery** Online
- 👤 **Who is this course for** Everyone who uses health and social care services
- 🕒 **Length of course** 25 minutes

[View course >](#)



Free course

Let's talk about a literacy friendly approach in healthcare

- 📺 **Delivery** Online
- 👤 **Who is this course for** Health and social care professionals
- 🕒 **Length of course** 40 minutes

[View Course >](#)



Free course

Let's talk about plain language

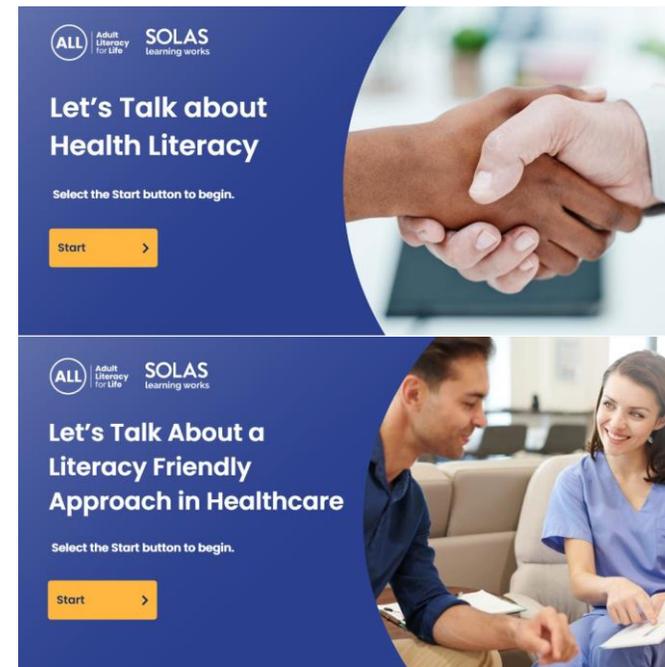
A course to introduce plain language.

- 📺 **Delivery** Online
- 👤 **Who is this course for** People who communicate with the public
- 🕒 **Length of course** 95 minutes

[View course >](#)

Next steps

- **UCC Microcredential**
- Empower your practice with the skills to bridge the gap between complex health information and real patient understanding—because better health literacy leads to better outcomes.
- Join this micro-credential to become the kind of healthcare professional who communicates with clarity, supports vulnerable patients, and transforms care through informed, compassionate education.
- **Further information is available at <https://lnkd.in/ejcwM54s> or email michelle.odriscoll@ucc.ie**



Health literacy courses

(Now available on HSEland)

