

Connecting Thread

Understanding Health Information

BACKGROUND

People with diabetes and their caregivers get information from many different sources. They may read blogs and social media, watch videos, and talk with health care providers, friends, and family. There is a large amount of information to sort through. This information can be complex and, at times, confusing, and it can be hard to know what it means.

Health literacy is a person's ability to find, process, and understand health information and services needed to make decisions. People of all ages, races, income, and education levels can be affected by low health literacy. Other issues like poor eyesight, language and cultural barriers, or cognitive differences or decline can also make it even harder for a person to understand information that is shared by a health care provider.

Diabetes care and education specialists and others who support people with diabetes have a role to play in lowering barriers to understanding health information. They have a responsibility to provide clear and concise information. When going through the

New Beginnings modules, you can ask participants what areas they struggle with in terms of finding, understanding, and using health information. It may be learning how to find reliable information online or how to understand instructions from their doctor. By finding out what is important to your participants, you can better engage them in finding ways to manage the challenges that come up.

Depending on the topic, you might ask a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist to join the session. Just remember that the goal is to help participants learn to find and use health information themselves, not to give them all the answers.

☆ KEY POINTS

- 1. Provide information that is easy to read. *New Beginnings* identifies which resources are easier to read.** When creating new resources, it is helpful to follow plain language guidelines and examples. These include knowing your audience before you write, choosing words carefully, organizing content so that it flows from one step to the next, and using headings, bullets, or tables to make material more readable. Learn more at the [PlainLanguage.Gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) website.
- 2. Focus on the needs of your participants.** Identify areas that are important to them. For example, they may be more concerned about learning to understand medicine labels than finding information online. People learn more from discussions that are meaningful to them, and they are more likely to understand information that is written with them in mind. *New Beginnings* identifies resources written for specific audiences, like older adults or men.
- 3. Remind participants that many people have trouble understanding health information.** It is a skill that can be learned. No one should feel embarrassed about being confused by information that is complicated and unfamiliar. When it comes to their health, they have the right to ask questions until they understand.
- 4. Use real examples and have the participants share back with you what you have discussed.** If you are teaching participants how to read medicine labels, bring labels for them to read. People learn better when examples are hands-on and match what they will find in the real world. When possible, use the teach-back method—have participants explain something back to you or to each other in their own words.
- 5. Do not answer specific health-related questions.** For example, someone may ask, “My last A1C was 12; what does that mean?” It is not appropriate for group leaders to answer specific health-related questions. Instead, help participants find the answer in one of the *New Beginnings* handouts or help them come up with questions to ask their health care provider. Learning how to find accurate answers to health-related questions on their own can help participants feel more self-confident about finding and using health information.



SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Where do you find most of your health information about living with diabetes?
- Where do you look for answers to questions you have about your health? Your doctor or health care team? Friends and family? Online?
- Do you feel like you know everything you need to know to keep yourself healthy? Do you ever find it difficult to understand or remember instructions you have received?
- Do you ever find it difficult to
 - Follow instructions on medication labels?
 - Fill out medical forms?
 - Read and understand complicated medical jargon about diabetes?
- Any other part of finding, understanding, or using health information?
- Do you feel like you have access to information that suits your language and culture preferences and needs?



SAMPLE ACTIVITY

Think-Pair-Share: Talking with Your Health Care Team

The goal of this activity is for participants to practice asking questions during health care visits to make sure they understand what their health care provider is telling them. This is important for them to be able to take care of their health and take any necessary self-care steps before their next visit.

- Ask participants to pair up with another group member. Have participants take turns playing the part of the health care provider while the other participant practices asking questions.
- Have the person playing the part of the health care provider give sample instructions for taking new medication or give self-care steps for between now and a follow-up visit. You can use one of the four steps outlined in the handout [Tips to Help you Stay Healthy](#) as the example instructions to be shared.
- Have the other participant practice responding to this information using the teach-back method.
 - The teach-back method is a communication tool used by health care providers to ensure that patients understand health information by having them explain it back to them in their own words.
 - For this activity, participants can learn to use this same strategy themselves so that they know they understand what they have been told.

SAMPLE ACTIVITY (CONTINUED)

- After receiving the health information from their partner, have participants respond by saying, “I want to make sure I understand what you have told me. Let me explain it back to you, and please tell me if I have it correct.” They can then summarize the information they received.
- Ask participants to discuss how the strategy will help them to make sure they understand health information and their future health care visits.

RESOURCES

Understanding Health Information on the Internet and in the Media

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [Use of Online Health Information](#)
- Medline Plus:
 - [Evaluating Health Information](#)
 - [Guide to Healthy Web Surfing](#)
- National Institute on Aging: [Online Health Information: Is It Reliable?](#)

Communicating with Health Care Providers

- CDC: [Don't Blame Me!: Helping Providers and People with Diabetes Overcome Challenges for Behavior Change](#) (webinar recording)
- American Diabetes Association: [Get to Know Your Diabetes Care Team](#)
- Institute for Healthcare Improvement: [Ask Me 3](#) (patient education program designed to improve communication between patients and health care providers)
- Medline Plus: [Understanding Medical Words Tutorial](#)
- National Institutes of Health: [Talking to Your Doctor](#)

Reading Food Labels

- Food and Drug Administration (FDA):
 - [The New Nutrition Facts Label: What's in it for You?](#)
 - [How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label](#)

RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

Taking Medicines

- CDC: [Injection Safety: Information for Patients](#)
- FDA: [The New Over-the-Counter Medicine Label](#) and [Medicines and You: A Guide for Older Adults](#)

Understanding Lab Results

- Medline Plus: [How to Understand Your Lab Results](#)

Understanding Health Insurance

- [Healthcare.gov](#) was developed to help people understand their health care options and rights under the Affordable Health Care Act.

Health Literacy Resources for Group Leaders and Health Care Professionals

- CDC: [Health Literacy](#)
- [PlainLanguage.Gov](#)
- US Department of Health and Human Services: [Health Literacy](#)

REFERENCES

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2010). National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved November 2019, from https://health.gov/communication/HLActionPlan/pdf/Health_Literacy_Action_Plan.pdf