

# Low Health Literacy Costs Everyone

(NAPSA)—A seismic shift in the health care industry is placing more responsibility on consumers than ever before to take charge of their health and make educated decisions about their care.

Although this shift benefits consumers in many ways, it has also revealed an increasing number of Americans who have limited health literacy, meaning they lack the ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. With consumerism set to continue transforming the health industry, it is critical that the barriers preventing consumers from adopting healthy behaviors are removed.

According to the National Adult Literacy Survey, nearly half of the U.S. population has low health literacy, which means that approximately 90 million Americans are unable to effectively read, understand and act on medical information. There is a discrepancy when the majority of health information literature is written at the 10th grade level and the average reading literacy grade level is only 6th grade for adults ages 25 to 65.

This and other gaps in health literacy result in a staggering \$7,500 per person in health care expenditures annually, according to the Partnership for Clear Health Communication. The economic consequences of limited health literacy for the U.S. health care system are considerable as well, costing an estimated \$50 to \$73 billion per year due to factors such as medication errors, longer or unnecessary hospital stays, increased use of emergency departments and an overall higher level of illness.

Patients who have difficulty reading and understanding verbal and written medical instructions



experience increased medication errors, reduced overall health and increased use of health services and resources. In addition, consumers with limited health literacy have trouble:

- Filling out health and enrollment forms;
- Explaining health conditions to physicians and providers;
- Finding appropriate and cost-effective providers and services;
- Using online resources;
- Managing ongoing health conditions and making the connection between their health and behavior (e.g., smoking can lead to lung cancer and heart disease).

While consumers do not look to their doctors to increase their day-to-day literacy, they should certainly feel empowered to ask them to support it by communicating in easy-to-understand language, creating and using consumer-friendly written materials, and verifying that they understand the information being presented to them.

Health insurance companies are also working to help combat health illiteracy. For example, after research recently revealed that women make 85 percent of the health care decisions for their families, UnitedHealthcare launched [www.uhc.com/source4women](http://www.uhc.com/source4women), a first-of-its-kind Web site designed to equip women with simple yet comprehensive health information, as well as to offer tools and checklists that help women manage their health and that of their families.