Health Literacy: What It Is and What It Means for You and Your Patients
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Summary: People often confuse basic literacy with health literacy—which is the ability to understand and act upon basic health information and make appropriate health decisions, but even highly educated patients may have poor health literacy. Over 90 million Americans are at risk because of poor health literacy. Patients with poor health literacy make more medication errors, experience more hospital readmissions, have longer lengths of stay, have difficulty complying with treatment plans, have higher mortality rates, and are more likely to report their health as being poor. It is predicted that by 2030 poor health literacy will reach epidemic proportions.

Nursing Implications:
- Patients over 60, minorities, non-native English speakers, and patients with limited literacy are at greatest risk.
- Stress, anxiety, illness, and symptom burden will impact a patient's health literacy.
- A single-question screening tool is most effective in identifying a patient with poor health literacy: "Would you like to have someone help you fill out medical forms or explain medical information?"
- Patient teaching is the 4th most time-consuming task for a nurse, so tailoring teaching to a patient's health literacy level improves efficiency and outcomes.

Key Takeaways:
- Utilize universal health literacy precautions: plain language and a 5th grade vocabulary with all verbal and written communication with patients, and avoid medical jargon and terminologies.
- Provide the most important information first—focus on "need to know" not "nice to know information".
- Focus on actions and behaviors, avoid using negatives like "don't", "not", or "unless", use printed materials to reinforce oral teaching not as a stand alone technique, and include pictorial aids in printed material to increase comprehension.
- Use teach back, limit teaching times, and ask frequent open-ended questions to assess understanding.

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