



# Understanding Health Literacy and Numeracy

Chronic diseases like diabetes rely heavily on self-management. Yet, in order to successfully self-manage, individuals must be able to understand and apply health information. It is well documented that low health literacy can be associated with poor health outcomes.

**Health Literacy** The degree to which people obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services in order to make appropriate health decisions.

**Health Numeracy** Basic math skills as related to health including understanding and applying numbers required for daily self-care.

## Relationship Between Diabetes-Related Health Literacy and Numeracy within Self-Care

Addressing health literacy and numeracy:

- Improves Self-care and Self-efficacy or the belief that one can be successful when carrying out a particular task
- Decreases health disparities
- Improves shared decision making

## Four Categories of Health Literacy

The US Department of Education identifies four categories of literacy level: proficient, intermediate, basic and below basic. The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey found that 36% of the population has basic or below basic health literacy skills. The majority of the population is at an intermediate level and only 12% are proficient. This means that approximately 90 million adults lack the health literacy skills required to navigate the healthcare system and effectively make decisions about their personal health care.

## Administering a Numeracy and Literacy Test

When administering a formal test, there are a few things to consider:

- A self-administered approach is less stress on the individual and respects their privacy
- An interview model can be more stressful and embarrassing for the individual
- When possible use disease specific tools

## Ways to Assess Diabetes Health Numeracy and Literacy

To access each formal method, visit [DiabetesEducator.org/HealthLiteracy](https://DiabetesEducator.org/HealthLiteracy)

### Informal Methods

- Identifying signs of persons' difficulty with reading and math
- Look for common signs:
  - Asking for help filling out forms
  - Forgetting their glasses
  - Asking to review the handout
- Ask open-ended questions such as:
  - Do you have any trouble reading and understanding medical brochures?
  - Do you have any trouble reading or writing in your native language? (for non-English speakers)

### Formal Methods

- Diabetes Numeracy Test (DNT) – short 5 item or 15 item long version
- Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine (REALM)
- Brief Health Literacy (5 minutes)
- Brief Print Health Literacy (5 minutes)