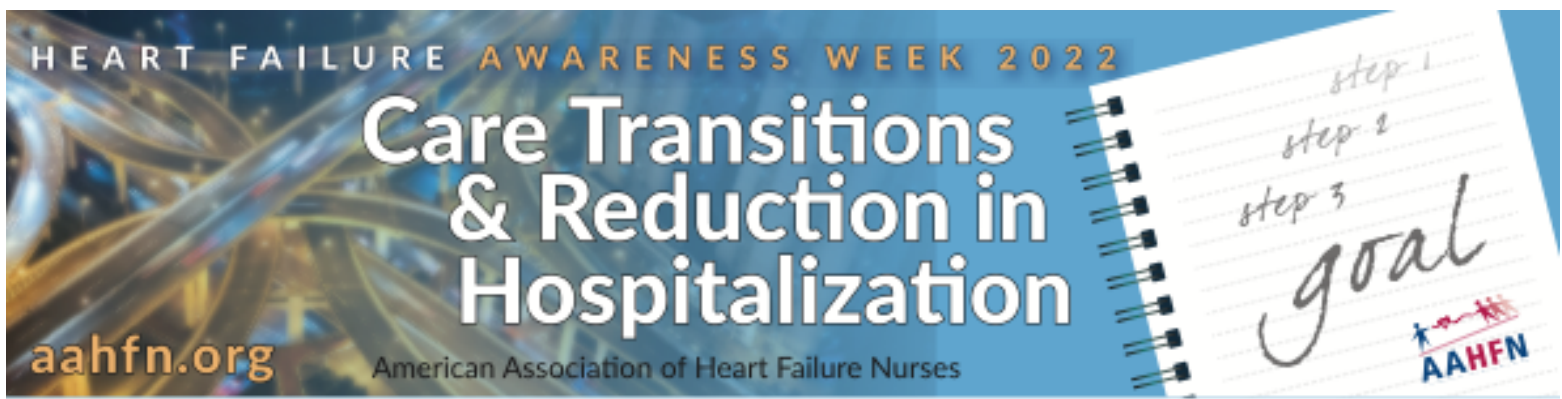




Health Literacy: A Tip Sheet for Nurses

What is health literacy?

Health literacy is the ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions.

Why is health literacy important?

Low health literacy is associated with poor health outcomes (faster disease progression, increased ED visits and hospitalizations, increased mortality, lack of patient engagement). Patients who have difficulty understanding healthcare instructions are less likely to adhere to treatment regimens and to access needed healthcare services appropriately.

How common is low or limited health literacy?

Over a third of U.S. adults (77 million people) have limited health literacy, meaning they would have difficulty with everyday health tasks, such as following prescription drug label instructions. One fifth of adults in the U.S. reads below the 5th grade level. Limited health literacy is sometimes hard to recognize; even well-educated patients may not have a good understanding of all the health information given to them. Factors associated with low health literacy include advanced age, limited education, lower income, chronic conditions, and race/ethnicity.

What is meant by “universal literacy precautions”?

Limited health literacy is so common, one approach is to assume that ALL patients want and need explanations that are easy to understand, as well as clear instructions on what they need to do. Studies have shown that interventions aimed at those with limited health literacy also benefit those with more advanced literacy skills.

What can I do to improve my patient's health literacy?

Here are some tips for effective communication with all patients:

1. Explain things without using medical terms
2. Focus on only 2 or 3 key messages
3. Speak more slowly
4. Use teach-back
5. Use easy-to-understand written materials (5th grade reading level, use pictures/illustrations, large font)

What else can I do?

In any patient encounter, pick the things your patient most needs to know and emphasize those things. Overloading a patient with information can interfere with retention of the message. The National Patient Safety Foundation recommends use of the “Ask-Me-3” approach. The provider is encouraged to answer (even if the patient doesn't ask) three questions:

1. **What is the main problem being treated?**
2. **What does the patient need to do about it?**
3. **Why is it important to do that?**