

12. Significance for Elderly Learners

Researchers suspect that health literacy declines with age. A large study of Medicare enrollees indicated that 34% of English speaking and 54% of Spanish speaking enrollees had inadequate health literacy (Gazmarian et al., 1999). Enrollees of higher ages had lower levels of health literacy. While the general public in the United States is believed to take medications as directed only 50% of the time, the elderly rate of compliance is believed to be lower. As taking multiple daily medications is increasingly common among elderly Americans, the implications of low health literacy for this age group are highly significant. Adult education instructors can assist the elderly (and other learners) at strategizing methods to understand and keep track of medication instructions, such as:

- Brainstorming and writing down questions about condition and care before seeing a health care provider.
- Getting written answers from the health care provider to show someone (perhaps a family member or friend) who can help understand them later.
- Keeping a list of medications and doses for one's own reference as well as to show the health care provider.
- Finding ways to help oneself remember which medicine is which (and what each is for), such as identifying them by color, shape, and size, or putting distinguishing stickers on their containers.
- Repeating back information to the health care provider to make sure you understand.
- Having a family member or friend go with you for your appointment to help you ask questions and understand instructions.
- Making sure you have contact information for the health care provider so that you can call with questions later on if necessary. (Korschun, 1999)

Additionally, older learners may need help finding sources of low-cost care, filling out applications for Medicare, and finding services to help pay for prescription drugs. Discussions and activities in adult education classes might help them problem-solve in these areas.

References

Gazmarian, J., Baker, D., Williams, M., Parker, R., Scott, T., Green, D., Fehrenbach, S., Ren, J., & Koplan, J. (1999). Health literacy among Medicare enrollees in a managed care organization. *JAMA, Journal of the American Medical Association*, 281(6), 545.

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