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 stressfull 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

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)