

New Plain Language Patient Education Handouts

Patient Education Online adds 25 plain language patient education titles in English and Spanish to its library. These handouts are the cornerstone of a new publication developed by the AAP Health Literacy Project Advisory Committee: *Plain Language Pediatrics: Health Literacy Strategies and Communication Resources for Common Pediatric Topics*.

The handouts are based on the content of existing AAP materials, however, elements of plain language were focused on and applied in the development of the handouts. The following is information from the guidebook about plain language.

Plain Language Benefits All Patients

Up to 90 million adults in the United States have limited literacy skills. Providing plain language written materials to these individuals may be especially beneficial. It is a common misconception, however, that plain language materials only benefit individuals with limited literacy. It has been shown that for adults of all reading abilities, information written at the 6th- to 8th-grade level is most likely to convey the health message, and be remembered.

Furthermore, all people, even health care providers, in the context of worry, medication effects, unfamiliar settings, or preoccupation with other concerns, can experience difficulty in comprehension or memory. Making written information as accessible as possible benefits all users and is respectful to the reader.

Some fear that plain language handouts will oversimplify the material. We believe plain language focuses the reader on the important information and improves overall understanding.

What is Plain Language?

The basic idea of plain language is to present information in a way that makes it as easy as possible for every reader to understand. The concept of plain language has been embraced as part of addressing health literacy within health care. The 2004 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*,¹ found that there is a mismatch between the health information people receive and what they understand.

A Plain Language Approach

The following elements of plain language guided the development of the handouts.

□ Reduced Medical Jargon

Whenever possible, we used everyday words instead of medical or scientific jargon. We made exceptions to this rule for medical words that we felt parents were likely to encounter outside the handouts, or from their child's doctor. These are listed in separate "Words to Know" sections, with simple definitions and pronunciation guides, when necessary.

□ Need-to-Know Information Up Front

It is common in the medical community to begin handouts with detailed explanations of medical topics that include complex biological information. Later, the reader is presented with the actions that he or she should take. To better focus parents on what they should do, the recommended

actions are at the beginning of these handouts. This increases the chances that the need-to-know, rather than the nice-to-know, information will be remembered. It also makes it much easier for parents to return to the handout when needed and quickly locate the actions they should take.

□ **Pronunciation Guide**

Certain words are difficult to pronounce due to unconventional spelling. For words that may not be easily recognized, we inserted reader-friendly pronunciation guides. (Applied to English titles only.)

□ **Lower Reading Level**

Reading level is primarily determined by the average length of the words and sentences. We aimed to limit the number of words with more than 2 syllables and keep sentences to 10 to 15 words. We also tried to keep paragraphs short. Medical information provided to patients often exceeds the 10th-grade level despite the fact that the average reading level of adults in the United States is below high school level. We strived for these handouts to be written below the 8th-grade level.

□ **User-Friendly Layout**

Within the handouts, we used headings, bullets, and larger fonts. We also highlighted information in sidebars, built in extra open—or white—space throughout, and kept all handouts to 2 pages. All of these design elements make information easier to access and comprehend. To further help make the handouts user-friendly, 2 individuals in adult literacy programs provided feedback concerning the general design and layout.

□ **Simple, Purposeful Illustrations**

Each handout is illustrated. We tried to make the illustrations simple and realistic. They depict a diverse population and reflect important content from the handouts. The illustrations either orient a reader to a topic area or make a point in support of the text, such as showing the correct way to perform an action. Detailed technical illustrations and nonrelevant illustrations were not included.

¹ Institute of Medicine. *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*. Nielsen-Bohlman L, Panzer AM, Kindig DA, eds. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2004