

Plain Language = Better Health Care

Low Health Literacy

Research conducted by the National Adult Literacy Survey estimates “90 million Americans – half of all adults – may struggle with low health literacy.” Older adults, minorities, immigrants, and people with low income are especially at risk for low health literacy.¹

Low health literacy has both human and financial costs. According to the Harvard School of Public Health, there is a strong correlation between patients with low health literacy and:

- poorer overall health,
- hospitalizations,
- misunderstood treatment explanations, and
- inability to follow medical regimens.²

Look how plain language made the Universal Protocol understandable for a greater number of patients:

Original Text (12th grade)

This brochure includes tips that can help you prevent errors in your surgery and make sure that you have the correct procedure performed at the correct place, or site, on your body.

Plain Language (6th grade)

Mistakes sometimes happen during surgery. Doctors may do the wrong surgery or operate on the wrong part of your body. Or they operate on the wrong person.³

There are financial costs to government and hospitals, too: The American Medical Association reports that “[I]ndividuals with low health literacy incur medical expenses that are up to four times greater than patients with adequate literacy skills, costing the health care system billions of dollars every year for unnecessary doctor visits and hospital stays.”⁴

Plain Language Solution

Using plain language to make sure patients can read and understand printed information is part of the solution.

Here are the basic readability features that make this form easy to read:

- A **short, easy title** that says what your document is about.
- **Familiar words, active voice, and appropriate reading grade level** work best. WIC (Women, Infants and Children) produces its materials at the 3rd–5th grade level. Other DHCS branches set goals of 5th–7th grade.

Anthrax

What is anthrax?

Anthrax has been used in terrorist attacks. It is a very serious disease. It is not contagious; you **cannot** get sick from someone who has anthrax.

How do you get anthrax?

There are 3 ways you can get anthrax:

- Through a cut or scratch on your skin.
- From breathing anthrax that is in the air.
- By eating food infected with anthrax.

How dangerous is anthrax?

Most people (99%) who get treated early for skin anthrax survive. Without treatment, 20% will die.



Breathing anthrax is more dangerous. Up to half of the people who breathe anthrax will die.

In rare cases, anthrax is found in meat naturally. There is a 25% - 50% chance of dying from eating this infected meat. Someone could add anthrax to food to infect the people who eat it.

– **Bullets and subheads:** Bullets break up the text and make major points stand out. (Use 5 or fewer bullets.) Subheads followed by short paragraphs break up the text so readers can quickly find what they need.

– **Font type:** If your document is in English and will be printed at a high resolution, use a sans serif font for headings, and serif for the body. Caution: Serif fonts, like Times, do not stand up well to photocopy, faxing, online display, or low-resolution printing. For

these sans serif, like Arial, is better.

– **Translation:** Plain language documents have less text and more white space — they are an ideal platform for translation into other languages, which generally expand by 25%.

Download this document from Transcend’s library at www.transcend.net/library/health.html

1. Center for Health Care Strategies, Fact Sheet #2
2. Harvard School of Public Health, Health Literacy: A prescription to end confusion
3. From Transcend’s adaptation of the Universal Protocol to Prevent Wrong Site, Wrong Procedure and Wrong Person Surgery
4. Health Literacy Studies, American Medical Association

