



## **Easy-to-Read Health Information Materials**

It is becoming increasingly important to provide patients and their families with clear, easily understandable written health information. An International Literacy Survey <http://www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/ClearLanguageAndDesign/facts/facts1.htm> in 1995 found that 48% of adult Canadians had a reading ability below Level 3 on a 5 level literacy scale. Level 3 is considered the minimum level to function successfully in our society. There is no evidence that this situation has improved.

The Health Information and Wellness Centre has pulled together information on this topic to help you provide written health information and instructions in simple, clear English.

### **Guidelines for Writing Easy-to-Read Materials**

- Know your audience. As a general rule, essential information for the general public should be at a Grade 6 – 8 reading level. Measurability levels can be measured using the Gunning or SMOG formulas.
- Use a simpler term rather than a more complex one e.g. 'shorten' rather than 'abbreviate'.
- Avoid constructions like 'and/or'. These are very confusing to those with low literacy skills.
- Avoid jargon and specialist terminology. If it is essential to do so, explain the term immediately within the text e.g. 'geriatrician (a doctor who looks after seniors)'
- Avoid acronyms, initialisms, and other short forms.
- Avoid long paragraphs. Keep sentences short, without dependent clauses wherever possible.
- Use bullet points and white space. Use large font.
- Use the active rather than the passive voice e.g. 'we will send you a report' rather than 'a report will be sent to all patients'.
- Address the reader directly e.g. 'you should take your tablets each night before going to bed' rather than 'patients are advised to take their medication nightly'.

### **Internet Sites Which Provide Instruction on Writing Easy-To-Read Health Information**

#### **Clear Language and Design**

<http://www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign>

This is an excellent source. They do charge for writing clear language material, naturally, but they also give some useful tips on the website. Click on 'Makeovers' in the left hand column to see some examples of before and after writing. Click on "Online Thesaurus" which gives lists of complex terms and provides simpler equivalents that you can use.

### **Centers for Disease Control**

<http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/simpput.pdf>

This is a 48 page booklet which provides comprehensive information on how to write simply, use language and visuals your audience relates to and understands, and organize the information so it's easy to act on and remember.

### **National Cancer Institute: Developing Effective Print Materials for Low Literate Readers**

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinformation/clearandsimple>

### **MedlinePlus – How to Write Easy To Read Health Materials**

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/etr.html>

### **Other Resources**

IA 850 O82 2005 M & WT

*Health Literacy from A to Z* by Helen Osborne. Boston: Jones & Bartlett, 2005

IA 850 N28 1998 WT

*Easy Does It: Plain Language and Clear Verbal Communication* by National Literacy and Health Program. Ottawa: Canadian Public Health Association, 1998  
Available at West Toronto

IA 850 CPHA 1999 WT

*Directory of Plain Language Health Information* Ottawa: Canadian Public Health Association and National Literacy Program, 1999

IA 850 B25 2000 M

*Clear writing and literacy, 2nd ed.* by Ruth Baldwin. Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2000

## **Internet Sites which Provide Easy-to-Read Health Information**

### **Healthy Roads Media**

<http://www.healthyroadsmedia.org/english/index.htm>

Subject/s: Various

Average reading level of material: Grade 6 – 8

Other languages: Several

Formats: Print, Audio, Slide Show, Web Video, Mobile Video

This is one of the best sites for easy to read material, although the number of health topics is limited. Most of the documents use simple language, with illustrations and plenty of white space. Many are available in audio and video formats, and in 18 languages apart from English.

### **Medline Plus**

[http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/easytoread/easytoread\\_a.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/easytoread/easytoread_a.html)

Subject/s: Various

Average reading level of material: Grade 6 – 8

Other Languages: Spanish

Format/s: Print, Interactive Online Slide Show, Video

This site provides good information in clear language – the font, layout and length are generally acceptable. There is a long list of links, categorized alphabetically by subject, which deal with specific medical problems and procedures. A significant portion of the links are to Medline's Interactive Tutorials, which are easy reading online slideshows with audio which users can run at their own pace.

### **National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse**

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/ez.asp>

Subject/s: Digestive conditions

Average reading level of material: Grade 5 – 6

Other languages: Spanish

Formats: Print

Very good, clear, and simple explanations of a number of conditions such as celiac disease, cirrhosis, constipation, irritable bowel syndrome and others. Information is given in point format with lots of white space and good illustrations.

### **National Kidney and Urologic Diseases Information Clearinghouse**

<http://kidney.niddk.nih.gov/kudiseases/ez.asp>

Subject/s: Kidney & Urologic conditions  
Average reading level of material: Grade 8  
Other languages: Spanish  
Formats: Print

Good, clear, and simple explanations of a limited number of topics concerning kidney and urologic conditions. Information given in short paragraphs with lots of white space and good illustrations.

### **National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse**

<http://diabetes.niddk.nih.gov/dm/ez.asp>

Subject/s: Diabetes  
Average reading level of material: Grade 10  
Other languages: Spanish  
Formats: Print

Good comprehensive material but reading level is fairly high and most of the documents are lengthy. There is lots of white space and large font, but no illustrations.

### **U.S. Food and Drug Administration**

<http://www.fda.gov/opacom/lowlit/7lowlit.html>

Subject/s: Various  
Average reading level of material: Grade 8  
Other languages: Spanish  
Formats: Print

Clearly presented information with good illustrations, given in point format with short paragraphs. Limited number of health topics.

### **American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology**

<http://www.aaaai.org/patients/resources/easy%5Freader>

Subject/s: Asthma and Allergies  
Average reading level of material: Grade 9  
Other languages: Spanish  
Formats: Print

Seven different documents are available, with a consistent format throughout. Although the site says they are at a fifth grade level, a random sample tests closer to Grade 9. Layout is good, with short paragraphs and point format, but illustrations are few and do not help explain the text.

### **National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism**

<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/Publications/PamphletsBrochersPosters/English>

Subject/s: Alcohol Abuse

Average reading level of material: Varies

Other languages: Spanish

Format: Print

There are some useful links here to documents on the effects of excessive drinking. However, despite being described as 'easy-to-read material', the reading level of the material varies greatly. Some are at Grade 6, with good layout and illustrations, others at Grade 10, and yet others at Grade 12 which contain long words not explained in the text.

### **National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute**

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/index.htm>

Subject/s: Heart, Blood and Lung Disorders

Average reading level of material: Varies

Other languages: None

Format: Print

The publications available at this site vary greatly in their reading level and scope. Some documents are Grade 6 level with useful illustrations, whilst others tested at a Grade 11 reading level. Also the individual documents are hard to find – it is necessary to have a high level of literacy to read the first page and find the required document, which rather defeats the object.

### **CLEO (Community Legal Information Ontario)**

<http://www.cleo.on.ca/english/index.htm>

Subject/s: Legal information, includes a health and disability section

Average reading level of material: Grade 9 - 10

Other Languages: French and Spanish

Format: Print

These materials cover many areas of law, including health and disability documents. The information is presented in bullet point format, very clearly laid out, and uses large font. The topics include Power of Attorney for both personal care and property and information on HIV testing.

**St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton**

<http://www.stjoes.ca/default.asp?action=article&ID=835>

Subject/s: Various

Average reading level of material: Grade 11

Other Languages: None

Format: Print and audio by phone

A good range of health topics is available. The reading level of these documents is rather high, but they are available by phone and it is planned to make them available in audio format directly from the website.

**Nova Scotia Health Network**

<http://www.nshealthnetwork.ca/search.cfm>

Subject/s: Various

Average reading level of material: Grade 8

Other Languages: None

Format: Print

This site badly needs updating, as many of the links no longer work. However, the ones that do generally lead to information sheets which use large font, straightforward layout and clear and simple language. The lack of helpful pictures is a problem with some brochures.