

HEALTH IN OUR HANDS!

The Arkansas State University Wellness Program Newsletter
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Health Literacy as it relates to Breast Cancer Education

Introduction

Health literacy is the degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions.

Health literacy is dependent on:

- Communication skills of lay persons and professionals
- Lay and professional knowledge of health topics
- Culture
- Demands of the healthcare and public health systems
- Demands of the situation/context

Health literacy affects the patient's ability to:

- Navigate the healthcare system, including filling out complex forms and locating providers and services
- Share personal information, such as health history, with providers
- Engage in self-care and chronic-disease management
- Understand mathematical concepts such as probability and risk

With October being Breast Cancer Awareness Month, let's take a look at a few studies that emphasize the importance of health literacy as it relates to breast cancer. Recommendations will be made so that as health care providers we can better promote health literacy.

A look into the literature:

Study 1: Health literacy and fear of cancer progression in elderly women diagnosed with breast cancer

The aim of this study was to investigate the association of health literacy and fear of cancer progression over the course of treatment in a sample of 344 newly diagnosed breast cancer patients, ages sixty-five and older. Post breast cancer surgery, health literacy was assessed via the European Health Literacy Survey (HLS-EU-Q16) while fear of progression was assessed via the Fear of Progression Questionnaire (FoP-Q). Forty weeks later, the same questionnaires were administered to note any change.

This study revealed that about half of the breast cancer patients were classified as having limited health literacy. Furthermore, inadequate and problematic health literacy was significantly associated with higher levels of fear of progression.

Take away from this study:
 Enhancing health literacy could contribute to reducing patients' cancer-related fears.

Study 2: Nutrition literacy among cancer survivors

Healthful diets may contribute to improvement in breast cancer prognosis as well as reduce cancer risk factors; therefore, this study was an effort to motivate healthy eating habits and adherence to dietary recommendations. Fifty-nine females, who had completed treatment, were enrolled into this study. Participants were randomized to the intervention or control group. The intervention group attended six nutrition educational sessions, while the control group received brochures. At baseline, questionnaires on demographics, nutrition literacy, health literacy, food intake, and health behaviors were administered. Upon completion of the study, feedback was collected regarding the nutrition education sessions.

Participants noted that sessions were helpful, especially the hands-on activities and cooking demonstrations. Patients reported finding social and emotional support which would be lacking otherwise. The feedback also helped identify barriers to healthy eating as well as domains of nutrition literacy that may need to be included in future interventions.

Take away from this study:

Providing quality patient education may result in behaviors that promote healthy living and reduce cancer risks.

Study 3: Unmet information needs and limited health literacy in newly diagnosed breast cancer patients over the course of cancer treatment

The aim of this study was to investigate unmet information needs in newly diagnosed breast cancer patients over the course of cancer treatment and its association with health literacy. The final sample included fifty-six German breast cancer center hospitals with a total of 1,060 patients. Patients were surveyed directly after breast cancer surgery, ten and forty weeks later. Socio-demographic data was collected using standardized self-report measures and health literacy was assessed using the European Health Literacy Survey Questionnaire (HLS-EU-Q16).

This study indicated high unmet information needs on side effects, medication, medical examination results and treatment options during the first 10 weeks after breast cancer surgery. The study also revealed patients with limited health literacy had higher unmet information needs. Patients with limited health literacy may be at a distinct disadvantage in having their information needs met over the course of breast cancer treatment.

Take away from this study:

Strategies are needed to reduce unmet information needs in breast cancer patients considering treatment-phase and health literacy, thereby enabling patient's to better cope and make appropriate decisions concerning their health.

Putting it into Practice:

As these studies indicate, health literacy is crucial throughout different phases of treatment and even in remission.

As health care providers, it is of utmost importance that we do our part to properly educate our patients so that they may make the best decisions concerning their health. Here are some tips to promote health literacy:

- The VARK (visual, aural, read/write, kinesthetic) questionnaire that can be administered to the patient to discover how he/she learns best.
- Ask open-ended questions to assess the patient's understanding.
- Use graphics and pictures instead of long written instructions if the patient learns better in this manner.
- Use simple language- avoid medical terminology or jargon.
- Speak more slowly when providing instructions.
- Provide information at an appropriate grade level.
- Communicate at eye level with your patient so they feel as if you are speaking to them at not *at* them.

As health care consumers, it is important to be in active participant in your care. Here are some tips to enhance health literacy:

- Repeat information to see if you understand the given instructions.
- If information is unclear, ask your provider to repeat the material and/or ask questions.
- If instructed on a task or usage of a device, demonstrate to your provider to ensure you are doing so correctly.

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- <https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/index.html>
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Other News:

**If you have any suggestions for newsletter topics, please contact Dean Susan Hanrahan at hanrahan@astate.edu.

The Arkansas State University Employee Wellness Newsletter is published monthly during the academic year by the College of Nursing and Health Professions. Health questions can be addressed to Dean Susan Hanrahan, Ph.D., ext. 3112 or hanrahan@astate.edu. Produced by Karinda Polk, graduate student in the College of Nursing and Health Professions, Physical Therapy Program.