

# Health Literacy: The Three Steps

Health literacy is "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions."

-- Institute of Medicine Report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*

There are three main components to health literacy:

- Obtain
- Process
- Understand

## Step One: Obtain

To obtain good health information, you need to know the difference between scientific facts from unfounded opinions.

- Consider the source. What's in it for them? For example, a health food store might tell you to purchase something that you don't really need, while the Tobacco Institute asserted that smoking was okay for many many years.
- Choose scientific resources. Scientific studies that are published in peer-reviewed journals are a great place for obtaining good evidence.
  - You don't have to go through the journals themselves -- try consumer-friendly sources like the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate.
- Seek the truth, not a magic bullet. Sometime change is hard, but that doesn't mean it isn't

worth your while.

## Step Two: Process

The more you read and learn, the more you will be able to process information and evaluate what you read. To successfully process health information, you must have the ability, will, and capacity to change.

- You can't always control your condition.
- You can control your participation and willingness to learn.

## Step Three: Understand

Do you understand enough of what you're learning? Will you be able to make decisions based on your understanding? Try these steps to build up your understanding...

- Read as much as you can (remember those credible sources).
- Ask questions when you visit your healthcare team.
- Find professionals that you trust.
- Take notes.
- Come up with your own action plan.

