



By Erin R. King

Jan. 4 (CBSHealthWatch)—When patients don't understand medications or their doctor's directions, it can be frustrating and even downright

An estimated \$73 billion is spent each year in the US on extra doctor visits and hospitalizations due to low health literacy, according to the American Medical Association (AMA) Foundation.

"Health literacy" doesn't mean a person has to read and understand medical information as well as their doctor does, but it does affect whether they can effectively carry out their doctor's instructions.

The AMA Foundation points to the comprehensive 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, that shows about 22% of American adults are at the lowest level of literacy. That means they may have trouble reading maps, filling out forms and applications, and dealing with numbers given in text. An additional 25% to 28% of Americans were only a bit more proficient.

Among the 90 million Americans at these two lowest literacy levels—who are likely to have difficulty understanding and following through on their healthcare—are many seniors. Some form of literacy difficulties affect more than 66% of US adults age 60 and over, and about a third cannot understand prescription instructions or fill out forms, according to the AMA Foundation, which is working to address the problem.

Federal healthcare programs for seniors ensure that for the most part, older American adults do have access to care, says Sidney M. Stahl, PhD of the behavior and social research program of the National Institute on Aging, but they may not be taking full advantage of the services.

Communication is key, he says, and so is being prepared. Bring a list of your questions and concerns to the doctor's office so you don't forget to ask them. Don't be afraid to tell your doctor about something you think might be important, even if it is embarrassing, he says. Notifying the doctor of a major life change or stressful situation, like the death of a loved one, can

Bring along a pen and paper to write down the doctor's recommendations, or have a family member or friend accompany you as a second pair of ears, especially if you have an eyesight, hearing or literacy problem, Stahl says.

Also bring any medications you may be taking so the doctor can see them, recommends Ruth Parker, MD, Emory University associate professor of medicine and chair of the AMA Foundation's Health Literacy Steering Committee.

When choosing a new doctor, call and see if you can meet before making an appointment for a checkup, Stahl says. Most physicians are receptive to this, and a 10- or 15-minute visit can help you decide how you feel about making the doctor your doctor.

Doctors, patients and other health care providers need to work together, Stahl says. "The relationship between a physician and a patient—whether it's an older patient or any patient—is a two-way street."

The National Institute on Aging produces booklet on the topic, called [Talking With Your Doctor: A Guide for Older People](#).