



Oral Health Literacy in Practice

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH



Using the OHL Toolkit

The OHL toolkit has been designed to help you implement health literacy in your practice. The tools in this collection are designed to be used any way that fits your available time and resources. But to help you get started, we've suggested two ways to use the components. The short-term approach lets you try out health literacy and make easy and inexpensive improvements. The long-term approach is more comprehensive and suggests how to use all of the toolkit components.



Toolkit components

- **This Oral Health Literacy in Practice guidebook** gives a high-level overview of oral health literacy and describes how you can implement health literacy in your practice.
- **The Practice Assessment Checklist** is an easy-to-use way to evaluate your practice's health literacy preparedness.
- **The What Is Teach-Back practice guide** helps oral health providers review and practice using teach-back.
- **The HL Action Plan template** provides a place for you to write down your own health literacy goals and come up with steps for reaching them.
- **The Going to the Dentist brochure** helps patients understand what happens, before, during, and after dental visits.

Short-term approach

Step 1



Read pages 4–7 of this guidebook.



Pick a health literacy team leader.

Step 2



Use the Practice Assessment Checklist.

Step 3



Using the assessment results, choose 3 things in your office that you feel you can improve quickly and easily, such as using plain language signage and forms.



Review the corresponding pages in this guidebook.

Long-term approach

Step 1



Read this guidebook.



Pick a health literacy team leader.



Have staff read this guidebook.

Step 2



Use the Practice Assessment Checklist.



Review the results with your team.

Step 3



Read page 5 of this guidebook and use the OHL Action Plan template.



Review available language services.

Step 4



Use the What Is Teach-Back? guide to practice teach-back skills.



Incorporate suitable language services.

Step 5



Organize trainings for staff on teach-back or motivational interviewing.



Monitor progress and revise your action plan.

What Is Oral Health Literacy?

Oral health literacy—the ability to understand and act on oral health information—is central to patients’ health and healthcare. Nearly half of American adults struggle to comprehend health information, including those who are highly educated. Many also feel shame about their oral health and are fearful of dental care. The result can be poor treatment adherence, failure to keep appointments, a lack of proper self-care, and frequent calls to office staff.

Another component of oral health literacy is a provider’s ability to communicate oral health information.

The goal is to do so clearly and effectively, so that everyone can understand. However, patients often report that the oral health information they receive is confusing and not suited to their needs. Fortunately, oral health literacy is a skill that each provider and staff member can learn. By taking the first step of reading this guidebook, you can help empower and motivate patients to maintain their oral health.



The impact of limited health literacy

Research shows that children and adults of all ages and education levels have trouble understanding information about their health or healthcare at some time. This can make it hard for patients to give informed consent, follow care instructions, and prevent health problems. This can also discourage patients from seeking further care.

The health literacy approach

The health literacy approach is simple: Treat everyone as if they may have limited oral health literacy skills. The American Medical Association and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality recommend a “universal precautions” approach, which helps to reduce the risk of miscommunication and to ensure that you are meeting the communication needs of all of your patients.

Using this guidebook

This guidebook is designed to help dentists, hygienists, assistants, and other dental practice staff create a supportive environment for patients at every touchpoint before, during, and after their visit. It outlines the steps team members can take to identify areas for improvement and provides instruction and practical resources to address them. Review each chapter for examples of the health literacy approach and consult the appendix at the back of this guide for corresponding tools.

Table of contents

▼ [CLICK THE LINKS](#)

Preparing Your Practice	4–5
Adopting Health Literacy	6–7
Communicating Clearly with Patients	8–15
Communicating Across Cultures	16–17
Concluding the Patient Visit	18–19
Health Literacy Tools	20–23
Oral Health Literacy Resources	25



Oral health literacy and your practice

There are many benefits to implementing oral health literacy in your practice.

- Improve relationships with your patients
- Increase patient loyalty to your practice
- Increase safety
- Improve adherence
- Increase equity of care
- Decrease liability

Preparing Your Practice

Preparing your practice for oral health literacy requires leadership and planning. The guidance on these pages will help you establish a simple and effective framework for creating a health-literate, shame-free, and fear-free environment for your patients and their family members.



Learn about oral health literacy

Implementing oral health literacy is a team effort. To make this effort a success, you should learn about oral health literacy. Take some courses on oral health literacy to learn the basics. Review [the resources](#) at the back of the guide to find a continuing education oral health literacy course.

Choose a team leader

The first step in implementing health literacy is to choose someone to lead your efforts. A team leader will help identify areas of improvement and develop a plan for change. Pick a team leader who:

- Works closely with your patients.
- Has an interest in health literacy.
- Has authority to change office procedures and patients' experiences.

Use a health literacy practice assessment

The oral health literacy team leader will assess your practice to determine how to reduce barriers to care. Use the assessment checklist* included in this toolkit. It will help the team leader review four areas for implementing health literacy in dental offices:

- Preparing for change
- Communicating with patients
- Creating a health-literate environment
- Empowering patients

* Adapted from Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

Raise awareness

All providers and staff should incorporate health literacy principles into their workflows. This requires raising awareness among providers and staff about how oral health literacy can affect patient understanding, adherence, and satisfaction. To raise awareness among your team:

- **Educate providers and staff.** Many free health literacy tools are available. Show the American Medical Association's [health literacy video](#) or have your team leader give a presentation. See the free tools in [the resources section](#).
- **Present the results of the health literacy practice assessment to providers and staff.**
- **Schedule periodic meetings.** Here, providers and staff can discuss oral health literacy barriers and propose solutions for your practice. You can also address oral health literacy at existing meetings.

Develop a health literacy improvement plan

Once you conduct a health literacy practice assessment, you can begin to determine what areas of your practice most need attention. Review the results with other decision makers. There may be some improvements you can make quickly and with few resources, but others may take time. From your discussions you can begin formulating a plan.



Ideas for developing a plan

- **Set short-term and long-term goals.** Decide what areas of your practice you want to improve. Perhaps you want to offer more language services or begin having providers and staff use the teach-back method.
- **Roll out your plan in stages.** Creating a health-literate practice takes time. It is okay to make changes slowly. Your plan should be realistic and achievable.
- **Define roles among staff.** Each provider and staff member should have a clear role and set of tasks. Discuss these roles to determine who is best suited for each task.
- **Make the plan practical.** Tasks and processes that are clear and feasible are easiest to perform. Some new skills, such as using teach-back, can take time to learn, but will improve with practice.
- **Consider measuring change.** It can be difficult to measure the impact of health literacy on patient outcomes. However, consider using measures such as patient satisfaction and appointment cancellation rates.
- **Ensure that providers and staff know the plan.**

Adopting Health Literacy

The following pages suggest ways to implement health literacy in your practice, but you don't need to follow every suggestion. Try to keep the process manageable. This way, you can improve the patient experience without overwhelming your practice's resources.

Initial contact

First impressions matter. The more your patients feel welcome and cared for, the more likely they will want to participate in their care. Here are some tips for making the initial contact positive and focused on the patient.

- Ask if the patient has a preferred language.
- Have a friendly tone and speak slowly.
- Explain what will happen during the visit.
- Ask what questions they have.



Questions for your practice from a patient's perspective:

- Has someone explained what I can expect during my appointment?
- Has someone told me what to bring to my visit?
- Can I easily read the signs and forms, even if I have limited eyesight?
- Are signs and forms available in the language I am most comfortable reading?
- Is the greeting from the front office person welcoming and friendly?
- Has someone offered to help with or explain the forms?
- Has someone asked about my preferred language?
- Am I being encouraged to ask questions about my care?
- Will I know what to do when I leave?

Create a safe and patient-centered environment

Coming to a new office with new routines can feel uncomfortable or intimidating. You can set up your office in ways that reduce patients' fear, shame, and discomfort. Some techniques for creating a patient-centered environment are practical, such as training staff to greet patients warmly. Others are about empathy. Imagine what it is like for a patient entering your practice for the first time. **Go through your practice site and ask yourself the questions above.**

Plain-language forms

Informed consent and other types of forms are often difficult to understand. Review [the health literacy resources](#) for examples of clear forms. Also consider having practice staff offer help in a shame-free way. Below are some examples of shame-free offers of assistance.



Poor example

“Do you understand those? Do you need help reading them?”



Good example

“Thank you for filling out the form. Can we go over it to be sure we got everything? Some questions are not always clear, and we want to be sure we have the correct information.” *

* Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit, AHRQ.

Identify translation/interpretation needs

Another important way to make patients feel comfortable and empowered is to ensure they are able to give and receive information in their preferred language. For patients who need assistance, be prepared to offer:

- A sign at the front desk that allows the person to point to the language they need.
- Forms and education materials in the languages that your patients speak.
- Suitable interpretation services. See page 17 for details.

Plain-language signs

Even small office settings can benefit from clear signage. If you don't currently use signs, consider adding some for your patients' benefit. Signs should:

- Use simple graphics to make your office easy to navigate.
- Provide simple and clear directions in languages your patients use.



Help with language services

Providing language services can strain a practice's resources. There are steps you can take to minimize the expense:

- Coordinate access to Language Assistance Programs. These are free to patient and practice through dental insurance carriers.
- Seek sources of reimbursement for language services.
- Provide access through language-line services.
- Hire staff that speak the languages most commonly spoken by your patients. Arrange for their certification as healthcare interpreters.
- Arrange to provide high-demand language services on certain days of the week.

Communicating Clearly with Patients

Patient communication is a vital component of any dental practice. How you communicate can influence how much patients trust you and others in your office, how they understand their care, and how motivated they are to keep up with self-care. These pages will review general strategies for clear communication, such as how to establish rapport and use teach-back.

A positive first appointment

The first appointment with a patient is a critical opportunity to establish rapport. All providers and staff should be sure to make it a positive experience, but the dentist most of all. Taking extra time during this visit to explain procedures and listen to patients' concerns is a small investment that can yield a significant return. The first appointment can influence:

- Patient disclosure of oral health conditions, behaviors, and home care practices.
- Treatment adherence.
- The patient's choice to make the practice their dental home.

When a new patient visits, consider setting aside a few minutes for a conversation. Use the tips in this chapter to help ensure that you convey what you intend to.



Clear communication starts with empathy

Most clear communication techniques start with a simple idea: empathy. To create a shame- and fear-free dental-care environment, think about who your patient is and what they need. Listen to their concerns. It will let them know that they are an important part of their oral healthcare team and help you create an effective treatment plan together.

Use plain language

Using plain language seems intuitive, and it is the foundation of communicating clearly. Unfortunately, it isn't always clear which words are plain. For example, the word "vial" appears simple because it's short, but many people find "small bottle" easier to understand. A better way to think about plain language is to **use simple, everyday words. Furthermore, don't hesitate to use several smaller words in place of one long one.**



Poor example

Alleviate symptoms
Primary care physician



Good example

Help you feel better
Your main doctor



Ideas for establishing rapport

- Sit at eye level with the patient.
- Have approachable, friendly body language.
- Ask about the patient's home oral health practices, their previous experiences with dentists, and their goals for their oral health.
- Listen closely. This may be the only chance you get to understand your patient's needs. Make it count.
- Show that you've heard what a patient has told you by repeating back the key points. This is known as active listening.
- Explain what will occur during the visit.

Communicating Around PPE

- When you and your staff are wearing full personal protective equipment (PPE), be aware that it hinders communication and explain to patients why it is needed.
- When you wear a mask and/or face shield, consider also wearing a photo of yourself near your ID, so patients can see your face and your smile.
- Smile with your eyes as well as your mouth, since patients can see your eyes over your mask.

Communicating Clearly with Patients (cont'd)



A healthcare provider's experience with teach-back:

"When I first entered practice, I explained everything in-depth to patients and they nodded their heads as if they understood ... but I never knew if they really understood. When I started using teach-back, I found that my patients understood some things and didn't understand other things. I learned that I needed to explain things more simply and then confirm what the patient understood. I got to be a better communicator."

Implement teach-back

Teach-back is a powerful technique to ensure effective provider-patient communication. After you explain information or demonstrate a practice to a patient, you ask them to explain or demonstrate back to you. This confirms the patient's understanding. It can also show what the patient didn't understand, and what you could explain more clearly.

How to do teach-back

- 1. Connect with the patient:** Show that you are listening and receptive with a friendly facial expression and tone of voice, as well as open body language.
- 2. Use simple and clear explanations:** Give only a few messages, use plain language, and be brief. Use visuals to reinforce your messages.
- 3. Ask the patient to explain or demonstrate back:** You might say "We've gone over a lot of information. I want to be sure that I explained everything clearly. Please explain it back to me in your own words."
- 4. If the patient has difficulty teaching back:** Apologize for not being clear enough. Try to explain again in a simpler or different way. Consider explaining one message at a time, then re-check with teach-back before moving to the next message.

Implement motivational interviewing

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a technique that harnesses a patient's motivation to make healthy behavior changes. It emphasizes a patient's autonomy, elicits their ideas and barriers for changing behaviors, helps them set an actionable goal, and positions the provider to support the goals the patient chooses.

- Many patients already know what behaviors are best for oral health. They're aware of their habits and what changes they "should" make. Additional oral health education alone is unlikely to prompt change.
- MI validates a patient's mixed feelings and helps them set a goal for small changes they can make within a manageable time frame.



How to do motivational interviewing

- 1. Set the stage for a patient-centered discussion:** Near the end of the visit, briefly talk with the patient about the most important healthy behaviors to consider. Emphasize, "Your oral health is in your hands. I'm here to listen and to support you in whatever you decide."
- 2. Ask about their thoughts and feelings and any barriers to changes:** Listen to your patient attentively, and be empathetic, nonjudgmental, and accepting of your patient's perspective. You can use phrases like "I'm hearing you say that ..." or "That's totally understandable."
- 3. Ask open-ended clarifying questions:** Be curious about your patient's experience, and ask questions to clarify their primary concerns, goals, motivations, and ambivalence. For example, try "Can you tell me more about how you feel about that?"
- 4. Help the patient clarify their own priorities:** Encourage the patient to identify a change they want to make, and why they want to make it. Use open-ended questions and respond with statements to support their motivation. For example, say "It sounds like you've had some challenges, but this is something that you're ready to try now."
- 5. Provide encouragement for the patient's chosen goal and plan:** Summarize what you heard the patient say and make a supportive statement. For example, say "I'm looking forward to seeing how well you're doing on your goal at your next visit." Avoid argument and direct confrontation.
- 6. Document the motivational interviewing counseling and the patient's chosen goal in the health record.**

Communicating Clearly with Patients (cont'd)



Break explanations into smaller pieces

Avoid overwhelming the patient with too much information at once. Instead, organize your thoughts and explain one idea at a time. If a concept is complex, break it into even smaller pieces. It helps to remind yourself to go slowly and allow your patient to absorb your words. Explain one idea at a time and pause in between. To confirm that you are going slowly enough, use the teach-back method.

✓ Poor example

“It is important to brush your teeth correctly, in tiny circles, and do so thoroughly every 24 hours.”

✓ Good example

“It is important to brush all of your teeth well twice every day. Brush gently, making small circles with your brush.”

Use visual aids

Many people find it easier to understand health information when they can see what is being explained. Use visual aids to emphasize your words. For example, demonstrate tooth brushing with a model. Some providers draw pictures or diagrams for their patients. Don't worry if you're not a skilled artist. Even a simple line drawing can help explain a concept to a patient.







Use nonjudgmental terms

The words that we choose, our speed of delivery, and our tone of voice affect how someone hears what we say. When diagnosing an oral health problem, providers may tend to be very direct. For example, a provider may say, “You have a cavity because you didn’t brush your teeth.” While this statement may be accompanied by a smile and positive intent, patients may only hear blame, which can lead to them feel disempowered. Remember, the words you choose affect how patients feel about themselves, your practice, and their care.

Encourage Questions

One of the keys to creating a shame-free environment is to invite patients to ask questions. Many people feel embarrassed to say when they don’t understand something, or simply don’t want to bother you with a “silly” question. When providers and staff encourage patient questions at every phase of the visit, it communicates to the patient that their questions are important. Be sure to avoid asking questions to which the answer is “yes” or “no.” Instead, ask open-ended questions. One example is shown below.

 Poor example	 Good example
<p>“Do you have any questions?”</p>	<p>“What would you like to know more about?” or “What questions do you have?”</p>

 Poor example	 Good example
<p>“If you don’t floss every day, you will end up having gum disease, and it’s irreversible.”</p>	<p>“if you clean between your teeth and gumline every day, it helps to prevent gum disease. Can I show you some alternatives to traditional dental floss? You might find one of them works better for you.”</p>

Communicating Clearly with Patients (cont'd)



Other ideas for reducing fear and shame

- Ask permission before looking in your patient's mouth.
- Give patients a way to signal you when they have a question.
- Describe what you will do before you do it, and wait until the patient is ready. This reduces fear, especially for children.
- Consider explaining what you're doing as you do it. This kind of play-by-play helps patients understand what is happening inside their mouth and why.

Working with interpreters

Interpretation is a skill that requires a lot of training, especially for specialized fields such as dentistry. Using a certified interpreter or telephone language service can give you some assurance that your words will be conveyed accurately. When working with interpreters, continue to:

- Use your clear communication skills, including the teach-back methods described on page 10.
- Speak to and look at the patient. The patient will then look to the interpreter for translation.



Seek communication training

This chapter is intended as a brief guide to communicating clearly with patients. Be sure to seek more detailed communication trainings, especially if you choose to incorporate motivational interviewing or teach-back into your workflow.



Ideas for conducting a tele-consultation

Tele-consultations have become widely accepted as a way to keep both patients and providers healthy, and they are likely to remain popular in the future. If you conduct patient appointments via video call, use the tips below.

- Make eye contact. Try not to be distracted by offscreen events in your office or in the patient's home. But keep in mind that sustained eye contact is considered impolite in some cultures.
- Be mindful of your body language, especially your facial expressions.
- Use active listening to show that you're engaged. Repeat the patient's words to summarize what they've said.
- Discuss when it might be necessary for a patient to visit the office.
- Explain any procedures and infection-control precautions that will be taken during their visit. Ask what questions they have.

Communicating Across Cultures

Patients bring their experiences and values with them when they interact with healthcare professionals, including oral healthcare providers. When patients can communicate effectively and feel listened to, they are more likely to follow their care plan and seek future care. Oral healthcare providers can foster respect and open communication with patients by making some changes in the office.



Having a Patient-First Mind-Set

Cultural humility is a set of principles created to help healthcare professionals interact with patients as a learner, not an expert. Having a humble attitude with patients helps them tell you about their needs and concerns. Key principles include:

- **Lifelong learning:** Cross-cultural communication is not learned once, then applied the same way for every patient. Training yourself to listen to patients and value their insights is an ongoing process.
- **Self-examination:** Assess patient interactions in your office, looking for barriers to care or effective communication. Look for ways that you and your staff can remove barriers and treat patients as care partners. Think about how your own culture influences your patient interactions. Note what works as well as what doesn't.
- **Recognizing and changing power imbalances:** Healthcare professionals have the upper hand in any interaction with patients. Think about how you and your staff can acknowledge and support patients' autonomy and expertise.

Inclusivity at Your Office: Practical Considerations

To overcome communication barriers, you need to know what they are. Ask patients if they need accommodations to communicate.

► Language Assistance

Language is the most common accommodation needed. Find out what language patients are most comfortable speaking and reading.

- Ask all new patients what language they prefer and if they would like an interpreter. Record this information in their charts.
- An “I Speak” list can help people identify their preferred language, if their English is very limited. You can download one [here](#).
- People who are hearing impaired may want language assistance services. Ask them what type of assistance they would like.
- Learn what languages are commonly spoken in your community. The American Dental Association and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services have lists of the top 15 non-English languages in each state. Or check with your local library or city government.

► Planning for Language Assistance

Here are some tips for providing language assistance.

- Put most of your resources into the languages most commonly used by your patients. Your patient records should give you an idea which languages are most needed.
 - Consider an on-site interpreter if you need language assistance often. Telephone and videoconference services are effective too.
 - Use trained (and preferably certified) interpreters.
 - Bilingual staff members can interpret if they have adequate skills and training.

- Family members and minors should not interpret. This presents problems with confidentiality and accuracy.
- Have a backup plan for languages you don’t encounter as often. On-call interpretation services by telephone or videoconference may work for these situations.
- Provide written communications in the languages commonly spoken by your patients. This includes posters, brochures, intake forms, and follow-up materials.

► Other Cultural Barriers

Some barriers are not as evident as language. Be proactive about reducing discomfort for your patients.

- Use the names, pronouns, and forms of address that people prefer.
 - In some regions and cultures, using Miss, Mrs., or Mr. is still an important sign of respect, especially for older people.
 - It’s better to ask how someone wants to be addressed than to assume and make a mistake.
 - If you accidentally address someone incorrectly, apologize, note the correct form of address in their file, and move on.
- Consider disclosing your own pronouns. That is, if you identify as female, let people know that your pronouns are she, her, and hers.
- Appropriate body language in the US may be viewed differently by other cultures. For example, sustained eye contact may be considered rude or aggressive.

Concluding the Patient Visit

When you have finished procedures with a patient and they are getting ready to leave your office, you and your staff have an opportunity to help ensure that they will follow the recommendations provided and that the next visit is successful.



Scheduling the next appointment

The last stop for your patients is probably the appointment desk, to schedule a follow-up appointment. This is another opportunity to ensure that patients are set up for future success. Your scheduler can confirm that the patient (or caregiver) has all the information they need before they leave. At this last touchpoint in a visit, consider giving the patient one or more of these:

- **Next appointment reminder card**, with the patient's name, and the date, time, and purpose of the next appointment. Include the office contact information on the card.
 - A take-home reminder card can help the patient enter the follow-up appointment in their calendar.
 - Reminders can be sent by postal mail or, with permission, by email or text. Following up via the medium a patient prefers is a good way to make them feel valued and may improve adherence.
- **Patient education materials**, such as any relevant brochures or information sheets.
- **Patient-satisfaction survey or questionnaire**. This allows patients to give feedback that they may not want to deliver face to face, or feedback they have later, after some time for reflection. Make the survey easy for patients to complete and return.
 - If the survey is printed, provide postage.
 - If the survey is online, give patients a printout with instructions on how to complete it.



The “exit interview”

You (or a member of your staff) can do a brief check-in with the patient to get feedback on the visit and answer questions. Here are some things you might say:

How did this visit go for you?

Can we do anything to make you more comfortable the next time you come in?

What would you like to know about your visit or procedure today?

We talked about what you can do to take care of your teeth starting today. Will you repeat that back to me? I want to be sure I explained it well enough.

Please let us know if you start having COVID-19 symptoms in the next 2 days.

The questions above are appropriate for both adult and many pediatric patients, but with young children, you may choose to direct some questions to the accompanying parent or caregiver. For example, you may want to use teach-back techniques to confirm that the parent or caregiver understands instructions about home care and future visits.



Other forms of follow-up

You may want to check on a patient’s condition after a procedure, or you may want to solicit feedback from patients without resorting to a questionnaire or survey. With patient consent, contact by email or phone can be efficient ways to follow up, but these messages should be crafted with attention to health literacy best practices to make them effective. Use patient records to customize these communications.

Health Literacy Tools

The tools on these pages have been designed and adapted for use in dental settings. They will help your practice determine the what and how of implementing health literacy.



Pre-appointment phone script

This phone script is just one approach to pre-appointment phone calls. You can modify it to suit your practice's needs.

▶ Dental staff:

Hi, Is this Ms. James? This is Rebecca from Dr. Monroe's office.

✓ If the answer is yes:

Ms. James, I am calling to talk with you about your upcoming appointment. Do you have a few minutes?

✗ If the answer is no:

That's okay. I am calling to remind you that your appointment is this coming _____. When would be a good time for us to talk for a few minutes before your appointment?

Great. We will call you then. We will only take a few minutes of your time to help you get ready for your visit. Thanks, and talk to you soon.

✓ If the answer is yes:

Excellent. I am calling today to talk about your visit. Since this is your first time seeing us, we want to give you some background information and help you get ready. Does that sound okay?

First, I want to make sure we have the right person. Can you tell me your date of birth?

► **Next**, I want to be sure that you know where we are.
Our address is: _____.
I can send you a map and directions if you need them.
There is free parking near our office, and you can also get here by public transit on these lines: _____.

Next, we have some questions about your health. Have you recently had any symptoms of COVID-19, such as:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea

We also want to let you know that we are doing everything we can to protect you against COVID-19.

- All seats and dental chairs in our office are spaced at least 6 feet apart.
- We require all visitors to wear masks.
- Our providers and staff wear extra protective equipment.

► **Now** we're going to go over some of what you can expect during your visit. When you get here, we will ask you again if you have any of the symptoms I just mentioned. And we will have some forms for you to fill out. These will take a few minutes to finish, so plan to get here a few minutes early. The forms are pretty short and simple, but the person at our front desk can help you if you have any questions.

Also be sure to bring any insurance information you have. Some of the forms will ask about that. If it helps, I can write down that information now so you don't have to worry about it later. Would you like to do that?

During your visit, you may spend time with a few different people. This includes the dental hygienist, who may clean your teeth, and the dental assistant, who may take x-rays of your teeth and get you ready for your exam. You will also see the dentist. Since this is your first visit you may spend some time talking with the dentist. They will want to hear about how you care for your teeth and what the two of you can do to make sure your teeth stay healthy.

Do you have any questions about that or about how we are protecting you from COVID-19?

Okay. So we will see you on _____, Ms. James. Please call us with any questions or if you need to reschedule. It is important for you to stay home if you are ill. Have a good day.

Health Literacy Tools (cont'd)



Follow-up phone script sample

▶ **Hello,**

This is Rebecca from Dr. Monroe's office. Is this Ms. James?

Ms. James, I want to make sure we have the right person. Can you tell me your date of birth?

Thanks.

Ms. James, you were here last Thursday to have a filling replaced. How does that tooth feel now?

If no problems following procedure: That's good to hear. Do you have any other questions or worries?

We have you scheduled to come back in for a checkup in January, and we'll send you a reminder postcard closer to the date. Let me make sure I have the correct mailing address. Is it still _____?

Have a great day, goodbye.

If patient needs a recheck right away: Let's set up a time for you to come in. Are you available Thursday morning at 9:30? Great, we'll see you then. Do you have any other questions or worries?

Have a good day, goodbye.



Follow-up email script sample

If a patient provides consent to contact them via email, the text below can help you frame that communication in clear and patient-friendly way.

▶ **Dear Ms. James,**

You saw Dr. Monroe in our office on July 12, 2021, and had a filling placed. We would like to know how you are doing now.

Does the tooth feel OK now? If it does not feel OK, we want to fix any problems. Please call our office right away to find a time to come back in. You can find our office phone number at the bottom of this message.

If you have any questions about your oral health care, please call or reply to this message.

Our records show that you are scheduled to return to our office for _____ on January 18, 2022. Please call if you need to change this appointment, or if you need to come in sooner. Otherwise, we look forward to seeing you then.

Warmly,

Dr. Monroe and Staff



Creating a health-literate intake form

Your intake form tells patients a lot about your practice, including how much consideration you have for them. A thoughtfully designed intake form shows that you and your

staff want patients to feel comfortable and welcome. The information below is not comprehensive, but it can get you started toward a health-literate intake form.

Review your intake forms

Assess the intake form that you ask patients to fill out.

- Does it include instructions at the top?
- Are all the questions relevant to your practice, or does it ask for more information than necessary?
- Does it have medical terms that should be reworded in plain language?
- Is the type large enough, and is there enough space for the patient to write?
- Is it available in the languages your patients speak?

Introducing the form

Try to begin each form with a brief explanation of its purpose. Start with something such as, “The questions on this form help your dentist and office staff give you the best care we can.” Also, if you provide the intake form in advance of the patient visit, remind the patient to bring the following items with them:

- The intake form.
- An insurance card or other insurance information.
- A list of their questions.

Questions about the patient

1. What is your name?
2. Do you need an interpreter?
3. What language do you prefer to speak and read?
4. How do you like to be addressed (for example, Mr./Mrs./Ms./Miss Smith or a nickname that you usually use)?
5. Please circle the pronouns you use:
He/His, She/Hers, They/Theirs,
other (please write in): _____
6. What is your date of birth?
7. What is your phone number?
8. What is your mailing address?

Questions about the visit

1. Why are you visiting us today?
2. Have you been having pain in your mouth or teeth?
3. Please describe how you take care of your teeth every day.



Your health history

Your answers on this form help your dentist and office staff give you the best care they can. Please write the answers in the space provided. If you would like help filling out this form, our staff can help you when you come in.

Be sure to bring these things to your visit:

- This form.
- Your insurance card or other insurance information.
- A list of your questions for us.

Questions about you

What is your name? _____

Do you need an interpreter? Yes No

What language do you prefer to speak and read? _____

What pronouns do you prefer?

He/His She/Hers They/Theirs Other _____

What is your date of birth? _____ What is your phone number? _____

What is your address? _____

Questions about your visit

Why are you visiting us today? _____

Have you been having pain in your mouth or teeth? Yes No Sometimes

Please describe how you take care of your teeth every day. _____

Oral Health Literacy Resources

- [Appointment card templates](#)
A series of appointment card templates available for printing.
- [Appointment reminder texts](#)
An introduction to HIPAA-compliant appointment reminder texts.
- [Ask Me 3](#)
An educational campaign with resources to encourage patient questions.
- [Always Use Teach-back! training toolkit](#)
A multifaceted and interactive resource for learning and using teach-back.
- [Clear Communication Index](#)
An easy-to-use assessment tool for patient communications from the Centers for Disease Control.
- [Cross Cultural Health Care Program](#)
Trainings and consultation from a nonprofit group that promotes culturally and linguistically appropriate care.
- [Culturally Connected](#)
An online training combining cultural humility and health literacy.
- [Guide to Providing Effective Communication and Language Assistance Services](#)
A guide to effective communication and language assistance services.
- [Health Literacy and Patient Safety: Help Patients Understand](#)
A guide to creating a shame-free healthcare environment from the American Medical Association.
- [Health Literacy Universal Precaution Toolkit](#)
A comprehensive roadmap for implementing health literacy in a healthcare setting from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.
- [The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Centers](#)
An assessment tool for identifying barriers to care in clinical settings.
- [I Speak Cards](#)
Printable cards that allow patients who do not speak English to indicate their preferred language.
- [Provider-patient communication videos](#)
A series of videos for oral health professionals that focus on motivational interviewing.
- [Simply Put](#)
A guidebook to creating clear and effective patient communications.
- [Smile, California](#)
A website with resources for patients and providers from Medi-Cal Dental.
- [Think Cultural Health: Cultural Competency Program for Oral Health Providers](#)
Three free courses about implementing culturally and linguistically appropriate communication in dental practices.
- [Tiny Teeth Toolkit](#)
A social media campaign for healthcare providers looking to promote oral healthcare to patients from the American Academy of Pediatrics.



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California Department of Public Health

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