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Health Care Literacy Technology Challenges



Navigating today's health care system requires more than understanding medical terms or insurance benefits; it increasingly requires confidence with technology. Between online portals, telehealth visits, mobile apps and digital insurance tools, technology often plays a central role in how people access and use care. However, not everyone feels comfortable in this digital environment. Technology challenges are now among the most common barriers to effective health care literacy. These challenges affect people of all ages and backgrounds and may affect you or someone you care about.

This article explores electronic health (eHealth) literacy, its importance, common technology-related obstacles and practical steps anyone can take to build digital confidence in health care.

What Is eHealth Literacy?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines eHealth literacy as a person's ability to appraise health information from electronic sources and apply the knowledge gained to addressing or solving a health problem.

In today's modern health care system, this includes the ability to find, understand, evaluate and use digital health data and tools to make informed decisions. It combines traditional health literacy with digital skills, such as:

- Using patient portals
- Scheduling appointments online
- Navigating virtual care platforms
- Evaluating online health information
- Managing digital insurance tools
- Understanding instructions delivered through apps, texts or email

Strong eHealth literacy means individuals can confidently interact with technology to support their health. Low eHealth literacy, however, can lead to confusion, delays in care, errors or missed opportunities to use benefits effectively. It's worth noting that eHealth literacy is not the same as being tech-savvy. Rather, it's about having the practical skills needed to complete everyday health tasks in an increasingly digital system.

Common Technology Challenges in Health Care

Many people face barriers when using health care technology. These challenges can be especially frustrating because they often occur at moments when someone needs care, reassurance or quick information. Here are some of the most common obstacles:

- **Difficulty accessing or navigating patient portals**— For many people, logging in and finding information can be a challenge in itself. Portals often require multiple passwords, verification steps or unfamiliar navigation menus that can feel overwhelming, especially for those who don't regularly use digital tools. Even users who are comfortable with technology can struggle with portals that have cluttered layouts or unclear labels. These obstacles can lead to missed messages, scheduling delays or confusion about test results.

- **Limited confidence with telehealth tools**—Many individuals feel uncomfortable or unsure when preparing for a telehealth appointment. Downloading platforms, enabling microphones and cameras, or adjusting device settings can feel confusing when instructions are unclear or unfamiliar. Technical issues can make it challenging to communicate effectively with a provider. While these resources can make care more accessible, these challenges can create anxiety and make people hesitant to use telehealth.
- **Challenges with mobile health apps**—Mobile health apps often require multiple steps, updates and permissions that can overwhelm users who prefer straightforward processes. Technical glitches, poorly designed interfaces or difficulty resetting login credentials can further discourage use. For individuals with vision impairments, limited hand mobility or older devices, apps may be even harder to navigate. When apps don't work well, people may miss reminders, delay medication refills or not be able to review messages from their care team.
- **Digital access barriers**—Even when digital health tools are available, they may not be usable for those who face connectivity limitations or lack access to modern equipment. Slow internet speeds, limited data plans and aging devices can all interfere with online appointments, downloads and secure messaging. These barriers disproportionately affect older adults, rural residents and low-income households.
- **Privacy and security concerns**—Health-related information is deeply personal, and uncertainty about privacy settings, data storage or potential security breaches can make people reluctant to use digital platforms. Many users also receive phishing emails or scam calls that mimic health organizations, making it hard to know what communications are legitimate. Without confidence that their information is safe, individuals may avoid using portals, apps or telehealth tools, even when those resources could improve their care experience.

How to Overcome Technology Barriers in Health Care

Building eHealth literacy is achievable through small, steady steps. Individuals and those supporting loved ones can improve comfort and confidence with digital health tools by using the following tips:

- **Start with the basics.** Take time to explore tools during a calm moment, rather than in the middle of a health issue. This can help individuals learn where things are located and how information flows, making digital tools feel more intuitive and less intimidating.
- **Ask for help.** Health systems, clinics, pharmacies and even public libraries often provide technology help desks, tutorials or staff who can walk people through digital tasks step by step. Many organizations also offer printed guides or short instructional videos that explain how to use portals or telehealth platforms.
- **Practice telehealth before the appointment.** A few minutes of preparation, such as checking your camera, microphone, lighting or internet connection, can reduce stress and make it easier to focus on your health concerns during the appointment. Many platforms offer "test visit" options that allow users to practice joining a session before meeting with a provider.
- **Use accessibility tools.** Most smartphones, tablets and computers come with accessibility options that can significantly improve the digital experience. Zoom text, bold fonts, high contrast, screen readers, voice commands and other features can help empower individuals with low vision, limited mobility or learning differences to interact more easily with apps and portals.
- **Request printed or verbal support.** Even as health care becomes more digital, individuals should feel empowered to request traditional forms of communication when needed. This might include printed visit summaries, mailed bills, paper forms or verbal instructions during an appointment.

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Understanding the basics of eHealth literacy can help you make informed decisions, communicate more clearly with providers and take advantage of beneficial digital health services. Whether you're supporting your own care or helping a loved one, improving digital comfort can lead to better outcomes, less confusion and a more positive health care experience overall.

Contact your HR representative or health care provider for additional resources to improve your eHealth literacy.

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