



PLAIN ENGLISH: TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND SAFETY

Using plain English can improve your health and the health and safety of your customers. When you go to a doctor or hospital to get information and medication it can be difficult. We can find it hard to hear and understand what the doctor or nurse is saying, particularly if they are using specialist health terms. We are often afraid to ask questions or don't know what to ask. We can also find it hard to read and understand the instructions on our medication.

Plain English is the best cure

One way to improve this situation is to use plain English. Plain English encourages the use of everyday language which helps to reduce the mystery and anxiety that surround certain health conditions. This benefits us all, but particularly those with literacy difficulties.

Reduce misunderstandings

You will significantly reduce the risk of misunderstandings and distress for your staff and customers if you use plain English for things like your:

- health and safety notices
- brochures
- other documents.

Use everyday words to explain medical terms - for example, write 'blood' beside 'haematology'. Use visuals to make your health and safety notices clearer for the public and your staff. This will also be really helpful for the one in four Irish people with literacy difficulties. See too the National Adult Literacy Agency's (NALA's) 'Toolkit for Literacy Friendly Healthcare Settings'.

Tackling health jargon through plain English

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has a plain English service, which involves editing materials and giving training. Many organisations have contacted NALA to have their information made clear to the widest possible audience. These organisations include health agencies and providers and a number of hospitals. The documents have included information sheets and booklets on things like:

- hospital services
- patient rights and responsibilities
- infant care
- men's cancer

NALA has awarded its Plain English Mark to a number of these publications.

NALA promotes the use of plain English in general settings and health settings. NALA also works in partnership with MSD, the pharmaceutical company. The Crystal Clear MSD Health Literacy Awards recognise best practice in health literacy. See www.healthliteracy.ie for information on recent award winners.

Why not think about ways you can provide clearer health information using plain English?

Common health and business jargon in Plain English

Before

After

analgesic	painkiller
ascertain	find out
catheter	tube
commence	begin
excise	cut out
optimum	best
particulars	details
suture	stitch

Before and after plain English example of health information

Before

The hospital patient has the right to information relevant to his situation that must allow the patient the fullest insight into all aspects of his situation, medical and otherwise, and, on an informed basis, enable him to make his own decisions or to participate in decisions which have implications for his or her wellbeing.

After

You have a right to information about your condition that helps you fully understand it and helps you to make informed choices about your treatment.

Which of these two examples would you prefer to read?

Plain English support

NALA's editing and review service of documents that can make your documents easy to understand. We also offer plain English training so that you can create more reader-friendly information. Contact plainenglish@nala.ie or call Claire O'Riordan at (01) 412 7922.