

# It's Safe to Ask

**It's Safe to Ask** is a health literacy initiative of the Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety. It was created based on the belief that patients and families can play an important role in enhancing the safety and quality of their health care by becoming active, informed members of their care team. The initiative offers practical information and tips for both providers and patients to assist with clear communication, make interactions more positive and informative, and help reduce healthcare errors and critical incidents.

Significant improvements can be made in the quality of health care and patient safety by doing something as simple as talking about three questions that often go unasked by patients, particularly those with low health literacy:

1. What is my health problem?
2. What do I need to do?
3. Why do I need to do this?

(These questions are based on Ask Me 3 – Partnership for Clear Health Communication in the U.S.)

In June 2008, the **It's Safe to Ask Medication Card** was launched. The **It's Safe to Ask Medication Card** is for people to record medications. The purpose of the card is to:

1. promote patient safety through safe use of medications,
2. encourage people to ask questions about their medications, and
3. help healthcare providers and emergency responders know patients' current medications

Available at [www.safetoask.ca](http://www.safetoask.ca) :

- Posters and brochures in 15 languages
- Medication Card (download or print)
- Videos for providers and the public
- "Safe Use of Medications" information for the public on medication safety
- It's Safe to Ask tips for champions
- Links to other medication safety information



**For more information or input on It's Safe to Ask, please contact  
Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety (204) 927- 6477**

## About Health Literacy

Literacy and health are related. People with low literacy skills have difficulty understanding such vital information as prescriptions, infection prevention tips, and healthcare directions for themselves and their families. Health literacy is the ability to find, read, understand, use and communicate health-related information. Clear communication between patients and healthcare providers is essential. **It's Safe to Ask** will lead to stronger communication between patients and providers, leading patients to become more informed about their health and more active in their healthcare.

## Did you Know...

- Six in 10 Canadian adults have low health literacy, and do *not* have the skills needed to adequately manage their health & health care needs.
- Daily reading habits have the single strongest effect on health-literacy ability.

Source: *Health Literacy in Canada: A healthy Understanding*. Canadian Council on Learning. 2008.

- The degree of health literacy each patient possesses has a major impact on his or her health, and experience of healthcare. An inability to read, write, understand, and effectively use basic healthcare instructions and information puts many Manitobans at a disadvantage.
- A report on the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS) found that in Manitoba, about 290,000 people – 40% of the population - had low literacy (Brink 2006). Findings also show that Manitoba has a high proportion of adults (35%) who did not complete high school, and that the majority of Manitoba seniors (over 80%) have low literacy skills. Among the 91,000 Manitobans with the lowest levels of literacy, only half had completed high school, and 51% of these people had a mother tongue other than English (45%) or French (4%).
- Eight percent of the population of Manitoba reported having an aboriginal identity, and in prose literacy, about 60% of urban aboriginal people in Manitoba had results lower than level 3. There are five levels for measuring literacy (1= lowest, 5 = highest). "According to experts, employers and government, level 3 is the level required for modern societies and the future knowledge based economies" (Brink, 2006). In contrast, 45% of non-aboriginals of Manitoba aged 16 and above had proficiency levels below level 3. Among the urban aboriginal population in both Manitoba the average scores for those 46 years and over was the lowest.
- The fundamentals of **It's Safe to Ask** are consistent with the patient safety goals of Accreditation Canada, and correspond with the Safer Healthcare Now! initiative's strong emphasis on medication reconciliation. Discussing health questions in a clear, organized way will lead to behaviour changes and safer outcomes for patients. When physicians encourage the use of the Safe to Ask questions, visits become focused, and time is effectively used.

**It's Safe to Ask** is aimed at:

Seniors	Aboriginal people
People who speak English as an additional language, new Canadians, people with low literacy	
Consumers of disability and mental health services	
Children and youth	Physicians, pharmacists and nurses

## About the Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety

The Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety is an independent non-profit organization. The Institute's role is to promote, coordinate and facilitate activities that have a positive impact on patient safety throughout Manitoba while enhancing the quality of health care for Manitobans. More information on the Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety and its activities are available at <http://www.mbips.ca/>.

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