

# *Helping yourself to health*

The patient booklet from the Better Informed for Better Health and Better Care series



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For more background and context on Information Literacy, please refer to the **Background** booklet in this series.

For the links between information literacy competence and the Knowledge and Skills Framework, please refer to the **Tables** booklet in this series.

For explanations of unfamiliar terms, please refer to the **Glossary** booklet in this series.

For demonstrations of search tools and techniques referenced in the tables, please visit our information literacy courses at <http://www.infoskills.scot.nhs.uk>.

For further information and resources related to information literacy, please visit the information literacy portal at <http://www.infoliteracy.scot.nhs.uk/home.asp>

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## Introduction

It's happened to nearly all of us at some time. Have you ever been to your doctor and left without really understanding or remembering what you were told?

If this *has* happened to you, then this booklet might help. It's intended to help you look after your own health or to help you support someone who needs your care.

This booklet will show you how to ask the right questions so that you find the right answers. It will help too in recognising 'good' sources of information, including your doctor, health leaflets and items on the internet.

With these skills, you'll be able to play a part in decisions about your treatment and the management of any health condition you have.

The booklet uses short extracts to describe specific situations and shows how some of the problems involved can be solved by using the steps of the information literacy cycle model. Following the extract, the stages of the cycle are shown in text which reflects the colour of that step. For example, the **question** stage is always coloured red, the **source** stage is beige, **find** is lilac and so on.



## Information Literacy

Information literacy supports patients, carers and members of the public to participate as partners in their own healthcare and in taking control of their own health and well-being.

The explanations and demonstrations included in this booklet are intended to show how information literacy can help in forming and asking focussed questions, in finding needed information from healthcare professionals or written and electronic sources, and in using retrieved information to make decisions about the treatment and management of health conditions.

Information Literacy is nothing more than a short-hand way of saying "the ability to find, assess, use and manage 'good' information".

The information literacy cycle model used in the booklet is a quick way to show the steps involved in getting to good information and using it when you've found it.

## The Model of the Information Literacy Process

The model used is intended to illustrate, very simply, the seven basic stages of the information literacy process – your way to get the information you need. These are :



- Question** what do you need to know? As obvious as it sounds, you must ask the right question to get the right answer.
- Source** where can you look for the information? Your sources will include people as well as written and electronic materials. Perhaps there is someone you know or can contact who would be able to supply the information you need?
- Find** which words do you use in your search? At the *question* stage you will have identified the key words in your question and are now ready to use them to search the sources you have selected.
- Evaluate** have you found 'good' information? Look closely at the information you have found to check whether your question has been answered. Do you believe the information?
- Combine** have you learned something new and useful from your search? Blend this with what you knew before searching.
- Share** would other people in your family find your new information useful or interesting? How will you share it with them?
- Apply** how will you use the information? Will this help improve management or treatment of your condition?

Becoming information literate and developing your existing skills and abilities is an ongoing process. It requires the continuous application and improvement of previous learning to build your level of skill and knowledge.

## Examples of information literacy in action

The following stories show how information literacy can help the people involved with their problems. Each story is followed by a single 'trip' around the information literacy process model, stage by stage.

### Jamie's Diagnosis

Jamie is 50 years old and has been unwell for some time. He has recently undergone a series of tests at his local hospital and has returned there today to hear the diagnosis.

During the session with his consultant, Jamie learns that his tests have revealed that he has multiple sclerosis (MS).

He knows very little about the disease and is shocked into speechlessness during the consultation. His wife too is unable to think of anything to say or questions to ask and the couple leave the hospital in disbelief and confusion.

The next day, Jamie and his wife have an appointment with the family doctor and are now full of questions. What is the disease? How did Jamie get it? Is there a cure? Who can help them? What will happen to Jamie? How quickly will the disease progress?



### Commentary

The GP appointment begins with Jamie and his wife at the first step of the information literacy cycle (**Question**) and they proceed from there through the remaining six stages :

#### **Question – what do Jamie and his wife need to know?**

What is the disease? How did Jamie get it? Is there a cure? Who can help them? What will happen to Jamie? How quickly will the disease progress?

#### **Source – where will they look for the answers?**

The GP

#### **Find – what will they learn?**

A more in-depth explanation of the disease and its management than was possible with the neurologist.

#### **Evaluate – is this 'good' information**

Does the couple believe what their family doctor is telling them? Will the other resources he has pointed them to, be helpful? Are they worth following up?

### Combine – what has happened in similar situations in the past?

Jamie and his wife have a good relationship with their doctor, built up over many years. They believe that he will support them through this crisis as he has done in the past.

### Share- who else needs this information?

Both Jamie and his wife need to understand the disease and how to manage it at home. The community team will be informed as they will also support the couple with Jamie's care.

The GP explains about the team's involvement including a nutritionist, nurse specialist, physiotherapist. He gives the couple a few leaflets, contact addresses and reliable internet sources so that they can learn more and make further contacts when they are ready to do so.

### Apply- how can Jamie and his wife use the information to help Jamie?

Jamie and his wife read the leaflets and contact the local branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society for more advice.

Having read the leaflets, Jamie and his wife have further questions and are beginning to understand that their GP will not be able to provide answers to all of them. However, he is their main information source for now. So, they decide to make a list of the things worrying them, so that either they or the doctor can identify reliable sources for the answers.

What type of MS does Jamie have?

How long will it be before he becomes unable to walk?

Will he have to give up work?

What medication will he be given?

What effects might this have on his ability to conduct his life normally?

If Jamie's wife becomes his full-time carer, is there financial support available?

Does this mean that the couple's children will get MS?

**A little practice**

Where do you think Jamie and his wife should look for the information they need?

Have a look at the questions they have listed and for each one, try to suggest who or what might be able to provide reliable answers.

Are there other questions they should be asking?

### Jill’s high cholesterol levels

Jill has problems with high cholesterol levels and was prescribed a 10mg statin by her GP. She has been taking the medication for seven years and is concerned about whether this treatment is still appropriate or the best available for her condition.

Jill decides to check with a variety of sources to update her information and understanding of possible developments in the treatment of high cholesterol over the past few years. These include : her own GP, Google, the NHS24 website, a friend who takes 20mg of the drug and her husband who has also been prescribed 20mg.

She collects a range of information which she reads, discusses with friends and then reflects on. She decides to make an appointment with her GP and to request a review of her treatment as she is now doubtful that 10mg is appropriate to her condition.

#### Commentary

Jill begins at the **question stage** with : *Is 10mg statin daily the best treatment for my high cholesterol?*

<b>Jill’s application of the information literacy process</b>	
<b>Question</b>	Is 10mg statin daily the best treatment for my high cholesterol?
<b>Source</b>	Family, friends, NHS24 website, Google
<b>Find</b>	Information from family and friends, articles from NHS24, Internet
<b>Evaluate</b>	Retain only reliable information
<b>Combine</b>	Compare recovered information with existing knowledge
<b>Share</b>	Discuss possible treatment(s) with family, friends, GP
<b>Apply</b>	Review current treatment with GP and introduce a new management/treatment plan if necessary



Jill had decided that she wishes to be actively involved in her own health management. In order to be able to participate fully, she knew that she needed to learn more about the things that worry her before discussing these with her doctor.

By applying the information literacy process, Jill has learned more about her own condition and its possible treatments and management.

Now, when she sees her GP, Jill is more confident about contributing her knowledge and understanding to their discussion and feels more involved in the decisions about her treatment.

**Something to think about.....**

Looking again at Jill's story, which of her sources do you think are most reliable?

What other questions might Jill ask her GP?

### Maria learns how to cope better with the menopause

Maria has recently received treatment for breast cancer. She is now experiencing some of the symptoms of the menopause and would like to speak with her GP about possible ways to manage the condition.

As the discussion proceeds, Maria reveals that as a result of the information contained in the newspaper articles she’s read, she fears the possible adverse effects of a course of HRT.

She has read an article in a woman’s magazine about complementary medicines and alternative treatments and asks for the doctor’s recommendations on these. While her GP hasn’t made a detailed study of these, he is sceptical about how helpful they might be.

However, as Maria has internet access at home, he suggests that the leaflet *Menopause* by Informed Health Online (at URL <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/menopause.201.161.en.pdf>) and the information on the websites of NHS Choices, NHS Direct and available through the e-Library might help.

He suggests that Maria makes a further appointment when they can discuss possibilities in more detail.

#### Commentary

Maria begins with the **question** : *What are my options for managing the menopause?*

Maria’s application of the information literacy process	
<b>Question</b>	What are my options for managing the menopause? How effective are complementary medicines and alternative treatments?
<b>Source</b>	Newspapers, woman’s magazine, GP
<b>Find</b>	Newspaper and magazine articles, GP, NHS Choices, NHS Direct
<b>Evaluate</b>	GP’s reassurance and recommendations. Possible alternative strategies
<b>Combine</b>	Previous knowledge, information from articles, GP’s opinions
<b>Share</b>	Maria’s fears, GP’s knowledge, NHS website articles
<b>Apply</b>	Access and read web articles, make further appointment



**More thoughts.....**

Do you think Maria is right to explore more information sources?

Can you think of some way her GP might be able to reassure Maria about HRT?

How can she learn more about alternative therapy such as herbal treatments?

## George gets adventurous in the kitchen

George is the father of a one-parent family with three teenagers.

He is able to cook but feels that the range of meals he makes for his family is a bit limited. He's also concerned about whether he's providing a 'properly balanced' diet.

His daughter is always worried about her weight and tends to be a picky eater while both of his sons work in the building industry and have very large appetites.

George needs good advice but wants to help himself rather than trouble his doctor with such an apparently trivial 'problem'.

He knows that everybody should eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and is vaguely aware of something called the healthy eating pyramid and the eatwell plate but is finding it hard to connect these with cooking healthy meals for his family.

Before he looks for recipes and cook-books, George decides to use the family computer to learn a bit more about food.

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### Commentary

George thinks about the questions he'd like answered.

What types of food are best for his family?

How much of each type of food should they be eating to be healthy?

What are the different types of fats and which are 'good'?

What sorts of meals can he give his sons to satisfy their appetites and at the same time please his daughter?

All of George's questions are about food so, using that word in his question will not help pinpoint the information he needs. He's finding it hard to come up with a question to use in his search then thinks that using "eatwell plate" and "healthy eating pyramid" might be a good way to start.

He decides to use Google to search for these and hopes that he will be able to find information on reliable websites.

After typing "eatwell plate" into the Google search box, George is delighted to see a website called "eatwell.gov.uk" at the top of the list of results. Because this is a UK government site, George feels confident that the information on the pages will be reliable.

The first sentence on the main page, "If you want to get the balance of your diet right, use

the eatwell plate” reassures George even more. He explores the site and finds that it explains everything he’d wondered about and more.

Just to be sure that the information is accurate and up-to-date (and in case he misses something important) George searches Google again, this time using “healthy eating pyramid” as his search (or ‘key’) term. This search identifies a Harvard University site. This is more technical than the UK site but the advice mirrors what George has read on the eatwell site.

Happy that he’s now found an excellent source of information, George bookmarks the site so that he can come back to it later or share it with the family. He’s much more confident about the proposed trip to the bookshop for a ‘good’ recipe book and about the meals he’ll be making for the family.

### Summary

George’s trip around the information literacy cycle	
<b>Question</b>	What is the “eatwell plate”? What is the “healthy eating pyramid”?
<b>Source</b>	The internet, using Google
<b>Find</b>	eatwell.gov.uk and hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/what-should-you-eat/pyramid/
<b>Evaluate</b>	One is a UK government site and the other an American university site therefore both are reliable. <sup>+</sup>
<b>Combine</b>	George now has a reliable reference which makes sense of the scraps of information he’d had about food.
<b>Share</b>	Bookmarking the sites for later use and for showing to his family
<b>Apply</b>	Uses the new information to help him identify ‘good’ cook-books



<sup>+</sup> Help on evaluating web sites is available in the information literacy courses at <http://www.infoskills.scot.nhs.uk/>. The fourth module of each course describes what to look for in a ‘good’ website.

**Reflection**

What other sources might George find useful?

What might be useful as a 'quick reference' for George?

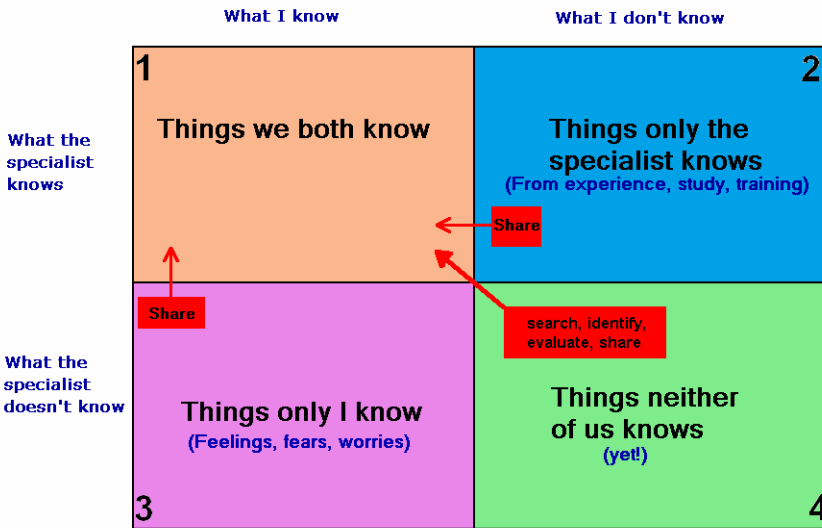
## When your information source is a person

When you need information and you ask another person for help, it seems obvious to say that they will know things that you don't (because they are specialist in their own particular subject) and you will know things that they're not aware of (perhaps you are worried, anxious, afraid?). This is one reason that it is important to be clear in your own mind what information you need from them so that you can ask the right question or, perhaps, use the right words when you ask questions.

When you speak with a specialist of any kind (this might be a librarian, nurse, doctor, consultant and so on) the diagram below might help you "see" your information need from more than your own point of view.

If you imagine yourself as the 'I' in the diagram, and the 'specialist' as the person you expect to be able to answer your questions, you will be able to see where you share information and where you each need to supply information to the other person.

### Information available during a consultation or conversation



**Box 1** represents information known to specialist and to me. It also holds information freely available to everyone and might include details reported in newspapers, magazines, books, television programmes etc.

- Box 2** represents the information that the specialist is aware of , much of which may be contained in his/her head. This is information acquired through training, study and experience. I can access this information only if the specialist chooses to share it with me.
- Box 3** is information only I know. This box is about my feelings, thoughts, worries and wishes. The specialist can access this information only if I choose to share it with him/her.
- Box 4** represents information as yet unknown to both myself and the specialist. This may be identified and recovered by following the information literacy cycle from the question stage to the apply step.

## **Further Information**

For more detailed information about Information Literacy, its context, background, links to KSF and other occupational standards and competencies, please see the other booklets in this series. These are available online from the Information Literacy Portal at <http://www.infoliteracy.scot.nhs.uk>

Further support in developing your information skills is available through the Information Literacy Skills courses online at <http://www.infoskills.scot.nhs.uk>. The course consists of eight modules : an introductory module which helps you assess your IT skills while each of the following seven modules is dedicated to a single step in the information literacy process.

If you would like some comment or feedback on your responses to the questions in this booklet or, if you would like to comment on the content of the booklet itself, please contact

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