



**EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE:
Feb. 6, 2020 8:00 a.m. CST**

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Women with Low Health Literacy More Likely to Encounter Worse Pregnancy Outcomes

Large, Multicenter Study is First-of-its-kind to Focus Exclusively on Obstetrics

GRAPEVINE, Texas — Health literacy, a consumer’s ability to get, process, and understand health information, is a key factor that contributes to improving a person’s overall health. Evidence suggests that low health literacy is associated with worse health outcomes.

While health literacy has been examined extensively in many areas of medicine, it has been rarely studied in obstetrics. When it has been studied, it has been primarily to assess knowledge. Until now, no one has conducted a large, longitudinal study of how a woman’s health literacy may affect her pregnancy outcomes.

In [a study to be presented today](#) at the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine’s (SMFM) annual meeting, The Pregnancy Meeting™, researchers will unveil findings that suggest inadequate health literacy is an independent risk factor for adverse maternal and neonatal outcomes and should be considered a social determinant of perinatal health (health issues that affect women before, during, and after childbirth). The research was funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shiver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

The study analyzed 10,038 women who had not previously given birth and were receiving obstetric care at eight US medical centers from 2010 to 2013. The women’s health literacy was assessed using the Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine–Short Form (REALM–SF), a seven-item word recognition test widely used by researchers and clinicians.

A total of 9,341 women completed the REALM-SF. Of those, more than 40 percent self-reported as a racial or ethnic minority, and 30 percent had a household income that was less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Recruitment intentionally was designed to sample a diverse cohort that is reflective of the general US population.

Results found that 17.5 percent of the women had inadequate health literacy, defined as less than a high school reading level. After accounting for potential confounding factors, including education, women who had inadequate health literacy were more likely to have a cesarean delivery and major perineal laceration (deep tears in the skin and other soft tissue structures that separate the vagina from the anus). The study also found that women with inadequate health literacy were more likely to give birth to neonates who had low Apgar scores, were small for their gestational age, or had low birthweight.

“Health literacy is an important, yet often under-recognized, social determinant of health,” said the study’s lead author Lynn M. Yee, MD, MPH, a maternal-fetal medicine subspecialist and assistant professor at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. “Our work suggests that low health literacy is a possible risk factor for adverse perinatal outcomes. These findings represent a call to action to the medical community: evidence-based interventions to address health literacy in obstetrics are needed. Pregnancy represents a prime window of opportunity to educate and improve a woman’s health literacy, which may help her health during pregnancy and can have lasting effects in other areas of her life.”

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About SMFM

The Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine (SMFM) is a non-profit, membership organization based in Washington, DC. With more than 4,000 physicians, scientists and women’s health professionals around the world, the Society supports the clinical practice of maternal-fetal medicine by providing education, promoting research and engaging in advocacy to optimize the health of high-risk pregnant women and their babies. SMFM hosts an annual scientific meeting in which new ideas and research related to high risk pregnancies are unveiled and discussed. For more information, visit [SMFM.org](https://www.smfm.org) and connect with organization on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#). For the latest 2020 Annual Meeting news and updates, follow the hashtag #smfm20.