

# Low health literacy is associated with preventable emergency department visits

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Low health literacy is a risk factor for potentially preventable emergency department (ED) visits, particularly those that result in hospital admission. That is the primary finding of a study to be published in the September 2017 issue of *Academic Emergency Medicine* (AEM), a journal of the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine.

The study, by Balakrishnan, et al, found that patients with limited health literacy are less inclined to access high-quality outpatient care compared to individuals with adequate health literacy. The study further suggests that until the underlying reasons for this disparity are identified and addressed, dissuading individuals from accessing [emergency medical services](#) for potentially preventable emergency department visits will likely be unsuccessful, even harmful.

The lead author of the study is Meenakshi P. Balakrishnan MPH, PhD, Clinical Research Manager in the Department of Emergency Medicine at the University of Florida, Gainesville. Balakrishnan's study proposes that the emergency department may be an important testing ground for literacy-sensitive precautions and interventions that have the potential to reduce preventable ED visits that contribute to high costs and inefficiency within the U.S. healthcare system.

Harrison Alter, MD, MS, FACEP, Associate Chair for Research in the Department of Emergency Medicine at Highland Hospital and Executive Director of the Andrew Levitt Center for Social Emergency Medicine commented:

"One of the key principles of social [emergency medicine](#) is that there are concrete things emergency physicians can do at the bedside when we are faced with social needs. Of all of the social determinants of health, health literacy—the ability of patients to grasp the words we use to describe our care—is one that we can practically reach out and touch. It is at the foundation of our compact with our patients. Dr. Balakrishnan's paper demonstrates this principle clearly and forcefully, suggesting that patients with low [health literacy](#) are twice as likely to use the [emergency](#) department for potentially avoidable visits."

**More information:** Meenakshi P. Balakrishnan et al. The Association of Health Literacy With Preventable Emergency Department Visits: A Cross-sectional Study, *Academic Emergency Medicine* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/acem.13244](#)

Provided by Society for Academic Emergency Medicine

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