

Requesting Translation of Patient Portals

Language barriers pose a big health threat to those with limited English proficiency.



Key Takeaways

- *Culturally and linguistically appropriate patient portals have the potential to decrease health inequities.*
- *Many hospitals and healthcare organizations are prioritizing accessibility and improved patient experiences.*

Most patient portals are only offered in English—which means roughly **25 million people** in the U.S. with limited English proficiency (LEP) may not be able to take part in the benefits associated with patient portal use.

If you or someone you know would benefit from a translated patient portal interface and content, read on.

Requesting Interpreter Services

Apart from the health benefits patient portals in multiple languages can provide, there are several laws and guidelines that highlight the importance of providing patient portals in peoples' preferred languages. For example:

- **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964** states that any department receiving federal financial assistance must take action to make its services, programs, and information accessible to persons with LEP. This **directly applies to** the 12% of persons with limited English proficiency on Medicaid, and 7.7% of persons with limited English proficiency on Medicare.
- **The National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards** were established to advance health equity by offering guidelines for health care organizations. The guidelines include recommendations to incorporate communication and language assistance services.

If you or someone you care for cannot use a patient portal because of its language, ask the hospital interpreter staff for help.

- **Certified medical interpreters** are not just bilingual individuals; they are highly skilled at interpreting medical information correctly. Hospital websites usually have information about interpreter

services at the very bottom of the page or within their accessibility policies. You can even search your hospital's name and 'Language or Interpreter Services' in a search engine to find out how to get help.

- Other healthcare staff like patient navigators or liaisons can also assist with accessing patient portals. For international patients at [Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston](#), patient liaisons help patients access and understand their medical records.

To improve the patient experience, healthcare providers need to know what problems their patients face. You can make a difference by voicing your concern at your next in-person visit with your healthcare provider or by contacting their clinic. You can also let the interpreter team know about your concerns so they can share them with your healthcare provider for you.

Overcoming Challenges in Providing Translated Patient Portals

Although patient portals in multiple languages can help patients with LEP, they are not always available to patients. Even if there is a version of the patient portal in another language, adding that version of the portal may be expensive for smaller healthcare organizations.

Case Study

When a healthcare organization in New York City [found](#) that English-speaking patients were more likely to receive an invitation to use their patient portal than patients who spoke Spanish, they launched a Spanish version of their patient portal and made a new policy that every patient would be invited to make a portal account.

Although less than 3 out of 10 Spanish speaking-patients were offered to use the patient portal in 2011, over 9 out of 10 were offered to use the portal in 2014. There was also an increase in the rate of repeated use of the patient portal by Spanish-speaking patients in 2014.

This shows that healthcare organizations can make changes and improve access to patient portals for their patients with limited English proficiency.

Recommendations to Improve Your Patient Experience:

- **Ask for health information in your preferred language.** If an interpreter is not already in the room during your appointment, your healthcare provider should be able to get one for you in

When presented with the idea of a patient portal in their respective language, 77% of patients with limited English proficiency believed the portal would improve their quality of care, according to a study in the [Journal of American Medical Informatics Association](#).

Culturally and linguistically appropriate patient portals have the potential to decrease health inequities faced by patients with limited English proficiency and improve overall health outcomes, according to research published in [Diabetic Medicine](#).

[Healthy People 2030](#) has set out to improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities across the United States through an extensive set of public health priorities. Included in these priorities is the improvement of health communication through appropriate and accessible electronic health information.

person or by phone. Ask how you can access your patient portal and other health information in your preferred language once you return home.

- **Ask for help with technology.** Let your healthcare provider know whether you need help accessing a device with the internet or if you need help navigating the patient portal. They may also be able to refer you to a social worker, patient navigator, or community organization that can help.
- **Give your feedback.** Fill out patient experience surveys you may receive while in the clinic, in the mail, or by email. Letting the clinic or hospital know about your experience can help them improve their care for patients. If you are comfortable providing your contact information, they may even reach out and address your concern directly.
- **Get involved. Ask your healthcare provider if there is a [patient advisory council](#)** you could join. These groups include healthcare providers, patients, and other hospital leaders focusing on how to improve the patient experience. Patient perspectives are highly valued and necessary when designing portals and other resources for patients.
- **Know your rights.** You [have the right](#) to an interpreter if you need one to understand what a healthcare provider is telling you. If you believe you have been discriminated against under Title VI law, you can consider [filing a complaint](#) with the federal agency that provides funding for the organization where the discrimination happened.
- **Use your patient portal and spread the word.** If you have access to a patient portal in your preferred language, use it to communicate with your provider and stay informed about your medical care. You can also [recommend the patient portal](#) to others in your community to support their healthcare needs.

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