



Improving numeracy and data skills in general practice

We all use maths every day, whether we consciously think about it or not. Staff working in healthcare are no different. Last week included National Numeracy Day, the annual celebration of numbers, making it the perfect opportunity for all of us working in healthcare to brush up on our skills. From interpreting graphs, making drug calculations and taking measurements from patients, to managing schedules and organising travel, all NHS roles are faced with numbers and data every day. Staff need to be confident with numeracy to be comfortable with these tasks. Without the right skills it becomes very difficult to deliver the best quality of patient care.

National Numeracy has spoken to hundreds of healthcare and we know that many feel anxious, stressed, nervous or frightened by mathematical tasks. This maths anxiety is very common amongst the UK population. Many staff have reported to us that they have delayed their careers due to a fear of facing numeracy tests. Others report experiencing high stress and low confidence as a result of their anxiety.

You might be thinking that what you learnt in school maths lessons isn't useful in your job. That algebra, trigonometry and simultaneous equations have never been useful in the real world. You are probably right. But by 'numeracy' we mean the way we use numbers on a day-to-day basis, and it's more than just simple adding up. What we are more likely to need at work is relatively simple maths skills, but the ability to apply them to more and more complex situations.

Let's consider an example. If you need to work out a patient's BMI, the numeracy skills you use are much more than just the calculation. As well as using the formula you may need to:

- Measure the height of the patient
- Read and record the weight of the patient
- Convert any measurements to the correct unit
- Interpret the BMI graph
- Make the right decision based on the result of the calculation

The National Numeracy Challenge can help you brush up on all these skills. It is based on the Essentials of Numeracy – the skills we all need for work and everyday life. When you register, you get an initial assessment which is based only on numeracy in real world contexts. The system adapts as you go, making sure it stays suitable for your level. Upon completion, you are presented with learning resources based on the questions you got wrong. You can work through confidentially in your own space and time.

Those who have signed up have found it to be a useful way of ensuring they have the skills they need in their job, giving them renewed confidence. Many have also used it as a stepping stone to qualifications, such as functional skills, that they need to access career progression opportunities in healthcare.

We have worked with people who at the start said that not only were they fearful, but that they were simply 'not maths people' and therefore believed they could never reach the skill level they wanted. But whole cohorts of self-confessed 'maths-phobics' have proven to themselves that they too are numbers people by reaching a score of 80 points, which demonstrates they have the Essentials of Numeracy.

We believe that we can all be numbers people. That's why we are encouraging everyone to register, check the level you are working at and start polishing your skills.