

Health literacy

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What is health literacy?

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.

Health literacy is dependent on individual and systemic factors:

- Communication skills of lay persons and professionals
- Lay and professional knowledge of health topics
- Culture
- Demands of the healthcare and public health systems
- Demands of the situation/context

Health literacy affects people's ability to:

- Navigate the healthcare system, including filling out complex forms and locating providers and services
- Share personal information, such as health history, with providers
- Engage in self-care and chronic-disease management
- Understand mathematical concepts such as probability and risk

Health literacy includes numeracy skills. For example, calculating cholesterol and blood sugar levels, measuring medications, and understanding nutrition labels all require math skills. Choosing between health plans or comparing prescription drug coverage requires calculating premiums, copays, and deductibles.

In addition to basic literacy skills, health literacy requires knowledge of health topics. People with limited health literacy often lack knowledge or have misinformation about the body as well as the nature and causes of disease. Without this knowledge, they may not understand the relationship between lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise and various health outcomes.

Health information can overwhelm even persons with advanced literacy skills. Medical science progresses rapidly. What people may have learned about health or biology during their school years often becomes outdated or forgotten, or it is incomplete. Moreover, health information provided in a stressful or unfamiliar situation is unlikely to be retained.

What is literacy?

Literacy can be defined as a person's ability to read, write, speak, and compute and solve problems at levels necessary to:

- Function on the job and in society

- Achieve one's goals
- Develop one's knowledge and potential

The term “illiteracy” means being unable to read or write. A person who has limited or low literacy skills is not illiterate.

Why is health literacy important?

Only 12 percent of adults have Proficient health literacy, according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. In other words, nearly nine out of ten adults may lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease. Fourteen percent of adults (30 million people) have Below Basic health literacy. These adults were more likely to report their health as poor (42 percent) and are more likely to lack health insurance (28 percent) than adults with Proficient health literacy.

Low literacy has been linked to poor health outcomes such as higher rates of hospitalization and less frequent use of preventive services. Both of these outcomes are associated with higher healthcare costs.

Who is at risk?

Populations most likely to experience low health literacy are older adults, racial and ethnic minorities, people with less than a high school degree or GED certificate, people with low income levels, non-native speakers of English, and people with

compromised health status. Education, language, culture, access to resources, and age are all factors that affect a person's health literacy skills.

Who is responsible for improving health literacy?

The primary responsibility for improving health literacy lies with public health professionals and the healthcare and public health systems. We must work together to ensure that health information and services can be understood and used by all Americans. We must engage in skill building with healthcare consumers and health professionals. Adult educators can be productive partners in reaching adults with limited literacy skills.

Anyone who needs health information and services also needs health literacy skills to

- Find information and services
- Communicate their needs and preferences and respond to information and services
- Process the meaning and usefulness of the information and services
- Understand the choices, consequences and context of the information and services
- Decide which information and services match their needs and preferences so they can act

Anyone who provides health information and services to others, such as a doctor, nurse, dentist, pharmacist, or public health worker, also needs health literacy skills to

- Help people find information and services
- Communicate about health and healthcare
- Process what people are explicitly and implicitly asking for
- Understand how to provide useful information and services
- Decide which information and services work best for different situations and people so they can act

Organizational Health Literacy

Organizational health literacy is what organizations and professionals do to help people.

- Find
- Process
- Understand
- Decide on health information and services. Organizations that remove health literacy barriers