



literacy & essential skills

fact sheet

Health

Studies show that literacy is a key determinant of health.

Low literacy, poverty and health problems are interrelated in many ways. Literacy barriers limit opportunities, resources, control of the future and ability to make informed lifestyle choices. Low literacy affects access to decent jobs and adequate incomes. Higher incomes correspond with greater ratings of health. Poverty and low literacy affect nutrition, mental health, stress levels and the ability to prevent illness.

Low literacy has been shown to have a negative effect on all aspects of health. This includes life expectancy, accidents and a wide range of diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer. People with higher literacy skills are more likely to live and work in safe and healthy environments and enjoy the associated health benefits.

Low literacy affects access to health services and information. Literacy skills are necessary to access and understand crucial health information. Literacy skills allow people to better engage with health professionals and institutions.

Poor health and poverty are barriers to learning and literacy. Poor health and other socioeconomic factors present real barriers to learning. Experiences in early childhood shape the way children think, behave, respond and learn. Older children and youth who have not developed a solid literacy base are at risk for school failure and dropout, antisocial behaviour, poverty and risky lifestyles.

Low literacy increases costs to the healthcare system. People with low literacy have poorer overall health. Low literacy can lead to misuse of medication, misunderstanding of health information, and overuse of health services and emergency care.

Literacy and health goals have a better chance of success when pursued together. Literacy programs provide the health system an important channel to reach people who are most at risk. In turn, health information provides a useful tool for literacy programs.

All Canadians benefit when the needs of literacy are addressed.

What can be done? Investments in literacy can succeed if there is:

- Increased understanding of the links between literacy and health
- Support for children and adults to develop and improve their literacy skills
- Development of partnerships between health and literacy organizations
- Use of clear language in both written and verbal communications
- A participatory approach to helping people learn about and understand the health issues that affect them
- Action on systemic issues, such as poverty, that adversely affect both literacy and health