

Health and Literacy

Health literacy is the ability to access, understand, evaluate and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain and improve health in a variety of settings across the life-course.

55% of working age adults in Canada, and 88% of adults over the age of 65 are estimated to have less than adequate health literacy skills.

As with general literacy, health literacy scores rise with the level of formal education attained, but tend to decline with age.

Low literacy skills prevent many patients from engaging in effective self-management. 62% of patients with lower reading skills are unable or unwilling to engage in self-management.

In order to manage chronic or long-term conditions, individuals must be able to:

- Understand and assess health information
- Follow complex medical regimens
- Plan and make lifestyle changes
- Make informed decisions
- Understand how to access care when they need it.

Social stigma associated with low literacy levels can interfere with health literacy in many ways, including:

- Difficulty asking doctors or pharmacists to explain language you don't understand
- Difficulty asking for help filling out forms
- Misunderstanding medical advice
- Feeling that you are a burden on the system
- Feeling overwhelmed by how hard it is to stand up and insist that your needs be met

Information obtained from: Irving Rootman and Deborah Gordon-El-Bihbety (2008) *A Vision for a Health Literate Canada: Report of the Expert Panel on Health Literacy* Retrieved from www.cpha.ca

Low health literacy may be addressed by:

- Increasing emphasis on lifelong learning
- Practicing reading and writing skills daily
- Increasing opportunities to learn about health and developing literacy skills in the community
- Incorporate health literacy in regular learning programs
- Increasing the skills of health professionals in recognizing low literacy and health literacy skills levels
- Raising public awareness about stigma associated with low literacy and health

