



## Factsheet #6

### Literacy is for 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 peoples' opportunities, resources, control over their lives and ability to make informed choices about their own lifestyle.
- Low literacy affects peoples' access to decent jobs and thus to adequate incomes. The higher their income, the higher Canadians rate their own health.
- Poverty and low literacy affect nutrition, mental health and the ability to prevent illness.
- People with lower literacy skills are more likely to be under stress.
- Many different sources confirm that low literacy has a negative effect on all aspects of health, including overall levels of life expectancy, accidents and a wide range of diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.
- Low literacy makes it difficult for parents to access parenting information, nurture their child's early learning and help them succeed at school, thereby continuing the cycle.
- People with lower literacy skills are more likely to work and live in unsafe or dangerous environments and suffer the consequences.

#### **Low literacy affects access to health services and information.**

- People with lower literacy skills (including people from cultural minorities) may have trouble reading and understanding health information unless it is clearly presented and directly linked to their realities.
- Less literate people may not have background health knowledge and vocabulary to understand instructions and information given verbally or in writing.
- Literacy barriers may also exist for those whose first language is not English or French.
- People with low literacy may not know about the services available to them. They often feel powerless and intimidated in relation to health professionals and institutions.

### **Poor health and poverty are barriers to learning and literacy for children and adults.**

- Poor health and other socio-economic factors are real barriers to learning.
- Experience in early years can 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, anti-social behaviour, poverty and risky lifestyles.

### **Low literacy increases costs to our healthcare system.**

- People with low literacy have poorer overall health.
- Low literacy leads to misuse of medication or misunderstanding of health information.
- Low literacy leads to preventable uses of health services, including emergency care.
- Less literate people often wait longer to seek medical help so health problems reach a crisis state.

### **What can be done?**

Literacy and health goals have a better chance for success when pursued together. Literacy programs offer the health system an important channel to reach people who are often most at risk. Health information, in turn, provides a useful learning tool for literacy programs. All Canadians benefit when the needs of low literacy are addressed. An investment in literacy pays off in better health when we:

- increase our understanding of the links between literacy and health
- support children and adults to develop and improve their literacy skills
- develop partnerships between health and literacy organizations
- empower people by using clear language in both written and verbal communications as well as participatory approaches to help them learn about and understand health issues that affect them
- take action on structural factors, such as poverty, that adversely affect both literacy and health.

### **Suggested *Literacy and Health* Resources**

- ✓ **The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA)** has the National Literacy and Health Program promotes literacy awareness among health professionals. The program works in partnership with national health associations representing health professionals such as nursing, social work, physiotherapy, optometry, palliative care and home care. Tel: 613-725-3769, fax: 613-725-9826, website: [www.nlhp.cpha.ca](http://www.nlhp.cpha.ca).

- ✓ **The Centre for Literacy of Quebec** does ongoing research work on a number of literacy/health initiatives and has recently produced a Background Document on Health and Literacy. Tel: 514-931- 8731, website: [www.nald.ca/litcent.htm](http://www.nald.ca/litcent.htm).
- ✓ **Health Canada** is very interested in the needs and issues of less literate Canadians. Visit their website at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) and look under Health Promotion Development for a report called “How Does Literacy Affect the Health of Canadians?” as well as other initiatives.
- ✓ **Literacy Partners of Manitoba** drew on research by The Manitoba Centre for Health Policy and Evaluation at the University of Manitoba to produce the report Literacy and Health: A Manitoba Perspective. Tel: 204-947-5757, fax: 204-944-9918, website: [www.mb.literacy.ca](http://www.mb.literacy.ca) (look under Member Publications).
- ✓ **The Ontario Public Health Association** has sponsored the *Literacy and Health Project* along with **Frontier College**. This project raised awareness about the links between literacy and health, fostered partnerships between literacy and health groups, assisted with various projects and activities, and created a clearinghouse of literacy and health information. Tel: 416-367-3313, e-mail: [opha@web.net](mailto:opha@web.net), website: <http://www.opha.on.ca/opha/>.
- ✓ **The Saskatchewan Literacy Network** developed *Health and Literacy: How do they relate?*, a kit with practical advice for addressing the health service needs of people with lower literacy skills. Tel: 306- 653-7368, website: [www.nald.ca/sklit.htm](http://www.nald.ca/sklit.htm) (look under Resources).