








Literacy and Older Adults

The older you are, the less likely you are to have the literacy skills needed for everyday life in Canada.

-  **80% of seniors are working with the lowest levels of literacy.** According to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), 48% of all Canadian adults fall into the lowest two reading levels. The majority of these are seniors, 65 and older. Based on 1996 statistics over 60% of seniors never completed high school. 37% had less than a Grade 9 education. 8% of seniors had a university degree. By the year 2041, 23% of all Canadians will be seniors, a significant increase from 12% in 1999.
-  **The increasing literacy demands of everyday life put older Canadians at a disadvantage.** Whether born in Canada or other countries, today's seniors grew up in a very different world. For many, their schooling was cut short by poverty, war, the Depression, family obligations, lack of access to schools or the lure of many good jobs that did not require high literacy or numeracy skills. Even for those who finished high school, the education they received may not have prepared them for the demands of today's society.
-  **Literacy skills will erode without regular use.** Reading habits are set early in life and many older people did not develop reading habits. If reading is not experienced as something enjoyable or does not become part of one's lifestyle in youth, years of avoidance can lead to a loss of the minimal skills that they started with. In later years, reading may even be an unpleasant or emotional reminder of an inability.
-  **Well-informed seniors are healthier, more active, more involved, and can live in their own homes longer – so their quality of life is better.** Seniors with low literacy skills are more likely to have health problems. Poverty, isolation and low literacy are usually linked and intensify other difficulties linked to aging. Less literate seniors have more difficulty maintaining their own health, safety, independence and self-esteem and are less able to care for others. Seniors with literacy barriers may not fully understand medical instructions or be able to make the best use of health and social services. Older Canadians may also miss out on information about new treatments, drug side effects or lifestyle changes that could enhance their health at the very time when their health needs are greatest.

 **Literacy instruction can help seniors increase their autonomy and quality of life yet seniors are underrepresented in literacy programs.** Too often literacy funding targets those whose goal is employment. As a result literacy programs are neither funded nor geared to adequately address the goals, values, interests and sensory needs of older adults.

Canada's senior population is among the fastest growing in the world. Many seniors even at the lowest literacy level, rate their reading skill for daily life as good or excellent and say that they do not need help with literacy tasks. Others have strong support networks on whom they rely for information. We need to understand these realities, the aging process and the diversity of seniors in order to better inform them and communicate with them.

What can be done?

- Clear and effective communications must target older Canadians. Even healthy and literate seniors may experience normal changes that can affect their access, level of interest and /or capacity to receive and understand information at a time when they may need it the most. Information must use plain language and be presented in a variety of appropriate formats.
- Literacy programs need to be allowed to encourage the participation of seniors. Programming must address their specific needs including their barriers such as negative memories of school, insecurities about attending with younger adults, believing that they are too old to learn, as well as lack of transportation and learning materials.
- More literate seniors can be encouraged to share their valuable talents as volunteer literacy tutors.

Suggested *Literacy and Seniors* Resources

- ✓ **Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA)**, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON, K1Z 8R1, tel: 613-725-3769, fax: 613-725-9826, e-mail: hrc/cds@cpha.ca, website: www.cpha.ca They have many publications: *Working with Low-literacy Seniors*, and *Creating Plain Language Forms for Seniors*.
- ✓ **Health Canada** has a Division of Aging and Seniors. Visit the website at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/index.htm (click on Publications) to view a report called *At Risk: A Socio-economic Analysis of Health and Literacy Among Seniors* as well as a number of fact sheets such as *Communicating with Seniors*. Tel: 613-952-7606.
- ✓ *Lifelong Learning in Action – A Report on Seniors and Literacy*. Marianne Paul, Project READ Literacy Network, 1997. Volume 1 presents the findings of a survey of seniors' literacy practitioners. Volume 2 provides guidance for doing literacy work with older adults.
- ✓ **National Adult Literacy Database** at www.nald.ca.

- ✓ **Statistics Canada** has produced *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada*, Statistics Canada. Check their website at: www.statcan.ca/english/ads/89-519-XPE/index.htm
- ✓ **University of Regina, Seniors Education Centre.** They have produced the *Older Adult Literacy Resource Manual* as well as a video called *Never too Late*. tel: 306-585-5706, fax: 306-585-5736, e- mail: seniors@leroy.cc.uregina.ca, website: <http://www.uregina.ca/seniors/index.htm>