

Literacy and Health

Literacy and health go hand-in-hand

The *2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, or *IALSS*, suggests a link between literacy skills and health. Adults who report poor health have lower literacy levels¹.

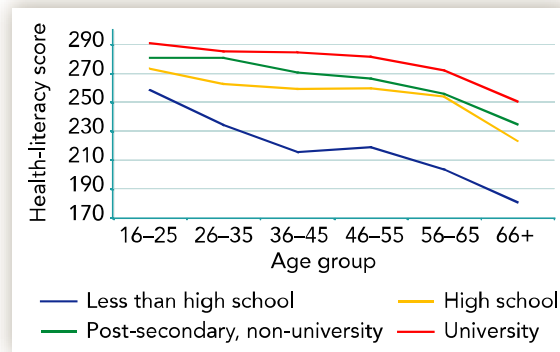
What is health literacy²?

Health literacy is not just about reading medicine labels. Health literacy means people are able to access, understand and use health information to make decisions to maintain their health. It also means they can find and access proper health services, communicate their needs to doctors and nurses, and understand and act on the instructions they receive.

Health literacy is complex. People need to be able to use a variety of literacy and numeracy skills at the same time. As a result, health literacy levels tend to be lower than general literacy levels. According to the Canadian Council on Learning, people with low health literacy are 2.5 times more likely to be in fair or poor health³.

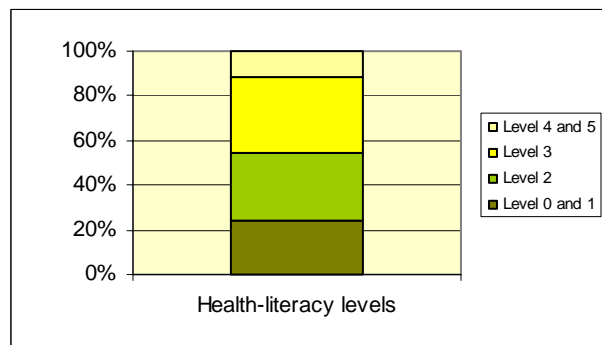
Health literacy varies with education levels and age. Adults with less than a high school education have lower health literacy scores than those with higher education. The gap between these groups widens with age (see Figure 1). In the NWT, almost 60% of the adult population has health literacy scores below Level 3 (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Average health literacy score, by age and education, Canada 2003



Source: *Health Literacy in Canada*⁴

Figure 2: Percent distribution of NWT health literacy proficiency levels, adult population (16 and over), 2003



Source: *Canadian Council on Learning*

Important influences on health

The *NWT Health Status Report 2005* suggests literacy is the education indicator most relevant to health and well-being⁵. The Public Health Agency of Canada lists 12 key factors that influence health – education and literacy are third on the list⁶.

How low literacy affects the health of individuals

Low literacy may affect people’s health both directly and indirectly⁷.

- Low literacy may limit people’s opportunities, income and control over their lives. This may negatively affect their health.
- Low literacy limits people’s access to health information. They may find it difficult to understand information, or be unable to follow instructions, such as how to use medicine correctly.

- Low literacy may prevent people from learning what health services are available. They may also be afraid of dealing with the health care system and of asking questions.

How low literacy increases the costs of health care

- Low literacy is associated with poorer overall health.
- Low literacy may cause people to misuse medication or misunderstand information.
- Low literacy may mean people use health services, such as emergency care, inappropriately.
- Low literacy may mean people wait too long before getting medical help, making their conditions worse.
- Low literacy may cause people to make poor lifestyle choices. In the NWT, the smoking rate for people 20 years of age and older with less than high school is more than two times higher than the rate for people with a university degree⁵.
- Poor lifestyle choices are more likely to lead to chronic health problems, such as diabetes or high blood pressure. For example, the incidence of diabetes increases significantly with lower health literacy⁸. In the NWT, the costs of treating diabetes are estimated to rise from \$4 million in 2005 to \$7.1 million in 2016⁹.

How can we improve health literacy and reduce health care costs?

- The Canadian Council on Learning claims daily reading has the “single strongest effect” on health literacy levels².
- We need to educate people about the links between literacy and health.
- Governments need to understand that investing in literacy will not only improve people’s literacy levels, but also improve their well-being and reduce health care costs.
- Health information needs to be clear and easy to understand. It should be available in a variety of formats – written, oral, video, face-to-face.
- Health and literacy organizations need to develop stronger partnerships and work together to improve health literacy.

- ¹ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada & Statistics Canada. (2005). *Building on our competencies: Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003*. Catalogue no. 89-617-X1E. Ottawa.
- ² Canadian Council on Learning. (2008). *Health literacy in Canada: A healthy understanding*. Ottawa.
- ³ Canadian Council on Learning. (2007). *Health literacy in Canada: Initial results from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2007*. Ottawa.
- ⁴ Canadian Council on Learning. (2007). *Health literacy in Canada: Initial results from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2007*. Ottawa. (p.22).
- ⁵ NWT Dept. of Health and Social Services. (2005). *The NWT Health Status Report 2005*. Yellowknife, NT.
- ⁶ Public Health Agency of Canada. (2003). *What determines health?* Available at http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/phdd/determinants/index.html#key_determinants
- ⁷ Movement for Canadian Literacy. *Literacy facts: Factsheet #6, Literacy is for health*. Ottawa.
- ⁸ Murray, T.S. (2008). *Measuring and monitoring literacy in the NWT: The cost of complacency*. Presentation at Literacy Matters Workshop, Yellowknife, NT, January 29, 2008.
- ⁹ Canadian Diabetes Association. (2005). *Diabetes report 2005: The serious face of diabetes in Canada, Northwest Territories background*.

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NWT LITERACY COUNCIL

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