

Literacy and Health

Literacy is a key determinant of health.

Low literacy, poverty and health problems are interrelated.

- Literacy barriers limit people's opportunities, resources, control over their lives and ability to make informed choices about their own lifestyle.
- Low literacy affects people's access to decent jobs and 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.
- Low literacy has a negative effect on all aspects of health, including overall levels of life expectancy, accidents and 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.
- People with lower literacy skills are more likely to suffer the consequences of working and living in unsafe or dangerous environments.

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.
- People with low literacy may not have the 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 can 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.
- People with low literacy skills 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 and participatory approaches
- 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)** 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. **Web site:** www.nlhp.cpha.ca ~ **Email:** nlhp@cpha.ca ~ **Phone:** 613-725-3769.
- ✓ **BC Coalition of People with Disabilities (BCCPD) Health Literacy Network** is a province-wide network working to improve access to health information by sharing resources and experience. **Web site:** www.bccpd.bc.ca/hln/index.html ~ **Email:** hln@bccpd.bc.ca ~ **Phone:** 1-877-232-7400
-  **Health Canada** is very interested in the needs and issues of less literate Canadians. Visit their website at 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.
-  **Culture, health and literacy** : a guide to health education materials for adults with limited English literacy skills by Julie McKinney and Sabrina Kurtz-Rossi.
-  **Health and literacy compendium** : an annotated bibliography of print and Web-based health materials for use with limited literacy adults researched and written by Cindy Irvine.
-  **Learning for our health:** a resource for participatory literacy and health education by Mary Norton and Pat Campbell.
-  **How does literacy affect the health of Canadians?** :a profile by Bert Perrin.

 - indicates an item that is in Literacy BC's collection. Visit the collection on-line at <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/catalogue/>

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