Quick Guide to Health Literacy

Fact Sheet

**Health Literacy and Health Outcomes**

Choosing a healthy lifestyle, knowing how to seek medical care, and taking advantage of preventive measures require that people understand and use health information. The ability to obtain, process, and understand health information needed to make informed health decisions is known as health literacy.

Given the complexity of the healthcare system, it is not surprising that limited health literacy is associated with poor health. This fact sheet summarizes key research study findings on the relationship between health literacy and health outcomes.

**Use of preventive services**

According to research studies, persons with limited health literacy skills are more likely to skip important preventive measures such as mammograms, Pap smears, and flu shots.\(^1\) When compared to those with adequate health literacy skills, studies have shown that patients with limited health literacy skills enter the healthcare system when they are sicker.\(^2\)

**Knowledge about medical conditions and treatment**

Persons with limited health literacy skills are more likely to have chronic conditions and are less able to manage them effectively. Studies have found that patients with high blood pressure,\(^3\) diabetes,\(^3,4\) asthma,\(^5\) or HIV/AIDS\(^7,8\) who have limited health literacy skills have less knowledge of their illness and its management.

**Rates of hospitalization**

Limited health literacy skills are associated with an increase in preventable hospital visits and admissions.\(^10-13\) Studies have demonstrated a higher rate of hospitalization and use of emergency services among patients with limited literacy skills.\(^13\)

**Health status**

Studies demonstrate that persons with limited health literacy skills are significantly more likely than persons with adequate health literacy skills to report their health as poor.\(^10,12,14\)

**Healthcare costs**

Persons with limited health literacy skills make greater use of services designed to *treat* complications of disease and less use of services designed to *prevent* complications.\(^1,11,13\) Studies demonstrate a higher rate of hospitalization and use of emergency services among patients with limited health literacy skills.\(^10-13\) This higher use is associated with higher healthcare costs.\(^15,16\)

**Stigma and shame**

Low health literacy may also have negative psychological effects. One study found that those with limited health literacy skills reported a sense of shame about their skill level.\(^17\) As a result, they may hide reading or vocabulary difficulties to maintain their dignity.\(^18\)
About the research

In producing this fact sheet, the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion relied extensively on both the Institute of Medicine (2004) and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2004) reports, which include comprehensive reviews of the literature on health literacy and health outcomes. For your convenience, the original studies are cited.

In these studies, health literacy was measured by the Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy (REALM) or Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults (TOFHLA). Both the IOM and AHRQ reports conclude that REALM and TOFHLA are assessments of reading ability, and as such are inadequate measures of health literacy.

Persons with limited health literacy were compared to those with adequate health literacy. Although an increasing number of studies have linked limited health literacy to poor health, the causal relationship between health literacy and health is unknown.


