

What is Health Literacy?

Health literacy is defined by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as: the degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, communicate, process and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions. It includes knowing how to describe symptoms, where to find help for health issues, how to understand medical information and how to safely manage the use of medication. Increasing health literacy is essential to empowering people to manage their health and advocate for their family's and their own wellbeing, as well as reducing the burden on Canada's health care system.



Health Literacy in Canada

- 23% of Canadians find it "fairly difficult" or "very difficult" to find out where to get professional help when they are ill, and 54% find it "fairly difficult" or "very difficult" to judge when to seek a second opinion from another doctor (*Consumer Health Products Canada, 2017*).
- People with low health literacy are less likely to:
 - ▶ Be able to identify their own medications
 - ▶ Understand how to take their medications
 - ▶ Understand the potential side effectsPeople with low health literacy are more likely to misunderstand warning labels (*Institute of Medicine Roundtable summary, 2017*).
- 60% of adults in Canada are unable to obtain, understand and act upon health information and services and to make appropriate health decisions on their own. Seniors, immigrants and unemployed people have, on average, lower levels of health literacy skills (*Health Literacy in Canada: A Healthy Understanding – Canadian Council on Learning, 2008*).
- Research estimates that providing chronic patients with education on self-management combined with ongoing supervision by a case manager could create savings of over \$2,000 per patient per year (*A Vision for a Health Literate Canada – Canadian Public Health Association, 2008*).
- There are more adults with low health literacy (60%) than there are with low levels of prose literacy (48% - defined as the ability to understand and use information from texts). These numbers suggest that the two literacies are different. Health literacy tasks usually involve a combination of prose literacy, document literacy and numeracy skills (*Health Literacy in Canada: A Healthy Understanding – Canadian Council on Learning, 2008*).