

Have you ever left a doctor's office or pharmacy not fully understanding the health information given to you? Imagine what this must be like for the 40% of Albertans with low literacy skills¹.

People with limited literacy skills face may experience the following health difficulties:

- giving the correct dosage of medication to a sick child
- filling out a medical form at the hospital
- safely operating a kitchen appliance
- finding a dentist or other health care provider
- asking questions about their health
- understanding a consent form for medical treatment
- interpreting blood sugar levels for diabetes

Studies show that higher literacy levels result in higher health levels and better quality of life.

People with higher literacy skills:

- are more likely to eat a healthy diet, have better mental health and have ways to prevent illness
- find better jobs with higher wages more easily than those with lower literacy levels
- have better ways to manage stress
- are better able to access parenting information that can help create a healthier environment for their families

People limited in literacy skills are more likely to live in poverty and may:

- experience higher levels of stress
- work in unsafe or dangerous jobs
- suffer from more diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer
- lack knowledge in making healthy lifestyle choices like eating nutritious foods and not smoking

Low literacy affects getting health services and health information.

- People with lower literacy skills may find it hard to read and understand health information unless it is written simply and talks about health problems that they can relate to.
- Less literate people may not have health knowledge and health words to understand instructions and information, either spoken or written.
- People who do not speak English or French as their main language may face literacy barriers.
- People with low literacy may not know about services they can use. They may feel powerless and scared when they are in health clinics, or hospitals; and when they speak to doctors or other health workers.

¹ International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, Statistics Canada, 2005

Low literacy increases costs to our healthcare system.

People with literacy challenges:

- often have poorer overall health
- may make mistakes with their medication dosage
- may not understand health information and may need emergency care more often
- often wait longer to seek medical help so health problems may become worse and cost more to treat

Poor health and poverty affect learning and literacy for children and adults.

- Poor health and low incomes are real barriers to learning.
- What happens in the early years can shape the way children think, behave, respond and learn.
- Older children and youth who have not developed good literacy skills are at risk for poor school performance and dropout, poverty and risky lifestyles.

What can people do?

Literacy and health workers will both have better results when they work together. Literacy programs offer the health system an important way to reach people who are often most at risk. Health information, in turn, is a useful way to teach literacy.

All Canadians benefit when literacy barriers are addressed. Working for literacy pays off in better health when we:

- understand better the links between literacy and health
- support children and adults to develop their literacy skills
- make partnerships between health and literacy organizations
- use clear language to communicate both in speech and in writing
- use teaching skills that bring in people with lower literacy skills as partners
- take action in our society so that poverty is ended

Sources:

International Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) 2005: www.statisticscanada.com
Health Literacy in Rural Nova Scotia Research Project, Doris Gillis, 2005
Health Canada 2003

For more information on literacy and how you can help, contact:

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