



Health Literacy



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What Does It Mean to Have Health Literacy Skills?

Health literacy skills means having the knowledge, skills, and ability to ask relevant questions to obtain and apply information, evaluate information for credibility and quality, communicate effectively, and make critical decisions to promote one’s own health and well-being and that of one’s family and community.

Issue Brief

A project of the American Institutes for Research

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Health literacy is the ability to find, understand, evaluate, communicate, and act on health information (Colman et al., 2011). It is dependent on context, culture, and the ability to communicate. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) defines health literacy as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand

basic health information needed to make appropriate health decisions.” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Many low-literacy adults avoid seeking health care until they find themselves in emergencies, resulting in higher rates of hospitalization and use of emergency services (Baker, et al., 2002). Health literacy is a vitally important topic for adult learners. Addressing health literacy in the classroom enhances general literacy skills and language acquisition, and improves students’ ability to evaluate health information, communicate with their health care providers, and make informed health decisions.

Health literacy is also determined by the skills of health professionals to communicate in ways people can understand (Al Sayah et al., 2014). Efforts to improve health literacy among adult learners must be matched by efforts on the part of the health care system to reduce complexity and improve communication (Brach et al., 2012). This is because health literacy is not the responsibility of the individual alone, but a matter of social responsibility.

Ultimately, having health literacy means having the ability to critically analyze and use health information to make decisions that have a significant impact on one's life, a skill best described as "critical" health literacy (Nutbeam, 2001). Health literacy occurs when information and services needed for health match the skills and abilities of those needing them (Parker, 2012). Having improved health literacy empowers adult learners to improve their health, their family's health, and the health of their communities.

Why Is Health Literacy Important?

Many adult learners must manage the health of others, such as young children or older parents, in addition to their own. Adult learners make health-related decisions every day, decisions that draw on their experience and knowledge of how to keep their families healthy, what to do when a family member is sick, and how to access and use health information and health care services. Promoting students' health literacy skills can help them to make these decisions more effectively.

Research shows that students with limited education and literacy skills have more health problems, less access to available health care services, greater difficulty understanding health information, and higher rates of hospitalization. In addition, those who do not speak English as their first language and are unfamiliar with the culture of the U.S. health care system face increased barriers at the intersection of health literacy, language, and culture. The literacy skills required to navigate the U.S. health care system are immense, and increasingly more demands are being placed on patients so that they can participate in making decisions and managing their own care (Durand et al., 2014; Hakami et al., 2018). This makes it even more important to have the skills to communicate clearly with health care providers, ask clarifying questions, evaluate the available information, and make informed decisions.

Only 3% of adults age 65 or older have proficient health literacy. Almost 50% (49%) of adults with less than a high school education have below basic health literacy. One study found 42% of adults with limited literacy skills did not understand instructions to "take medication on an empty stomach" (Davis et al., 2006)

The adult literacy system provides opportunities for adults to gain these critical skills. As adult learners work to build their general literacy, educators can support the development of the other skills that are necessary for their health literacy at the same time.

How Do You Implement the Skills That Matter in Health Literacy?

Regardless of context, the same underlying skills always matter in health literacy. Below are examples of instructional activities to foster development of the skills in the context of the adult literacy.

- **Critical thinking:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to recognize barriers to good health, behavior, and social determinants (environmental conditions). Learners create and conduct a survey of class members' reasons for making choices or engaging in behaviors that are not good for them. Groups analyze data they collect around one health topic (e.g., exercise), create graphs, present findings, and summarize barriers to that behavior.



- **Communication:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to communicate health information in ways people can understand (patient-provider communication; communicating health information to family and community). Learners work in small groups to develop a poster on a topic of their choice related to health and hygiene (e.g., hand washing, avoiding the flu). They also practice writing an email to inform their child’s school about an absence due to illness.
- **Processing and analyzing information:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to evaluate the accuracy and reliability of health information in the news and on the Internet. Learners fill out a handout that guides them to compare and contrast the information provided on two health information websites. They determine which of the two they trust more and explain their reasoning.
- **Self-awareness:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to recognize cultural health beliefs and the culture of health care in the United States and to respect differences and diversity. Learners watch video clips describing what health care is like in different countries and share the differences they noticed between what they saw in the video, what they have observed in the United States and, if relevant, what their experience was in their home country.
- **Problem solving:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to differentiate health care needs (prevention versus emergency) and be adaptable to difference health situations (staying healthy versus an emergency). Learners choose a specific illness on which to focus and then investigate what can be done to prevent that illness and what the treatment should be when someone has contracted it. They develop short “cheat sheets” that are compiled into a prevention and treatment booklet for everyone in the class.
- **Navigating systems:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to access the U.S. health care system, including health insurance, and to use the Internet to navigate and access health information and services. Learners read a scenario about someone whose child has suddenly become ill and respond to guided questions about what action to take.

What Are Some Tips for Teaching Health Literacy in Your Classroom?

- **Create a supportive learning environment.** You do not have to be a health educator, imparting knowledge to your students, to effectively integrate health literacy skills into your classroom. Your goal is to create a learning environment that teaches the skills that matter in order to help adult learners find, understand, evaluate, communicate, and use health information for themselves and their families.
- **Draw on learner health beliefs, experiences, and knowledge.** Students sometimes learn best from one another. A learning environment in which students’ contributions are valued will make them eager to share what they know and think, to value one another’s ideas, and to learn and evaluate new information and incorporate new information into the decisions they make.
- **Collaborate with local health organizations.** Working with a local health organization provides opportunities for real-life experiences such as field trips and speakers. Such connections can improve students’ knowledge about available services and build their confidence to move toward using these resources independently.
- **Prepare health professionals before they speak in your class.** Many health professionals and even health educators are not prepared to present information in ways adult learners will understand. Supply presenters with tips for communicating clearly. Use visual aids, define new words, and break information into manageable chunks.



- **Have students share what they learn with others.** The act of presenting health information to others can encourage students to share what they have learned with family and friends. It also gives learners opportunities to use new health information and reinforces what they have learned.

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This project is funded under U.S. Department of Education Task Order No. ED-ESE-15-A-0006/91990018F0371 with the American Institutes for Research.

