

Health Literacy

What is health literacy?

Health literacy is the capacity of individuals to obtain and understand basic health information and services, and the competence to use such information and services in ways that enhance health.

Important health literacy standards expect children and adolescents to show they can:

- 1) comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention
- 2) access valid health information, products and services
- 3) practice behaviors that enhance health and reduce risk
- 4) analyze the influences of culture, media, technology, and other factors on health
- 5) use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health
- 6) use goal-setting and decision-making skills to enhance health
- 7) advocate for personal, family, and community health

The Problem

- About one-third of adults have a marginal or inadequate health literacy level, with many at or below the level expected for a person in eighth grade.
- Health care costs for people with low health literacy are four times higher than those with adequate levels of health literacy. Some have estimated that low literacy levels in the United States increase medical expenses by \$69 billion per year.
- Individuals with inadequate health literacy tend to spend more on medical expenses. For example, people who have inadequate health literacy tend to spend \$500 more than people with adequate health literacy per inpatient hospital visit.
- Low health literacy could lead to inappropriate medical care or to patients taking medication incorrectly.
- Knowledge and skills in the area of health could help to prevent illnesses and disease.

This knowledge and these skills can be acquired as children, but:

- Only 2% of schools require health education for twelfth graders, even though the majority requires health education for children in elementary school.
- Only 10% of the health education classes in elementary, middle, and high school are taught by teachers who have a degree in health education.

What can teachers and school administrators do?

- ✓ Encourage teachers to increase their own levels of health literacy.
- ✓ Appreciate and discuss the relationships between a student's health and his or her overall academic achievement.
- ✓ Make a commitment to helping children achieve the health literacy standards.
- ✓ Plan for adequate time and age-appropriate instruction when teaching health.
- ✓ Allocate continuing education funds to increase the health education knowledge and skills of those who teach health.
- ✓ You may learn a lot by talking to students. Ask them about their health concerns; try to identify areas of interest or confusion.

What can parents do?

- ✓ Create an environment and opportunities that encourage your child to talk to you about health concerns.
- ✓ Recognize age differences when discussing health issues.
- ✓ Educate your child about medical procedures before visiting the doctor or hospital.
- ✓ Find out from whom and where you can access accurate and applicable health information (e.g., physicians, health educators, and the Internet).
- ✓ Learn more about health and share what you learn with your child – make health discussions commonplace.
- ✓ When you hear inaccurate health information, point this out to your child and explain why it is inaccurate.
- ✓ Speak up – advocate for resources to adequately prepare those who teach children about health.
- ✓ Insist that teachers dedicate time to teaching health education as well as math, science, and reading.

What can children do?

- ✓ Don't be afraid to ask teachers and parents about health – they want to help you.
- ✓ If someone is telling you something about health and you don't understand, tell them so.
- ✓ Learn the best places to find good health information and learn how to recognize information that is not good.
- ✓ Pay attention to what you are taught about health and try to follow what you are taught.
- ✓ If you are having a hard time staying healthy, talk about it with an adult you trust.
- ✓ Think about to whom you could go to discuss something you saw about health on the television or the Internet.
- ✓ Share what you have learned about health with members of your family, your friends, or others in your neighborhood.
- ✓ Start thinking about how your choices now will affect your health later in life.

Resources

www.kidshealth.org – tailors health information to parents, teens, and children
www.pfizerhealthliteracy.com – explains the impact of and defines clear health communication
www.webmd.com – allows people to search for various health topics, including health literacy
www.csuohio.edu/healthed/standard.htm – summarizes the goals of the National Health Education Standards
www.healthliteracy.com – includes technical information on health education and information about Health Literacy Month
www.cahealthliteracy.org – this site has links to various health literacy related websites
www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/health.html – highlights some of the health literacy facts
www.worlded.org/us/health/lincs/muro.htm – gives an overview of ways to improve adult health literacy
<http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcsums/litsum.htm> – technical information on how health literacy is assessed in adults, and shows some of the health outcomes related to health literacy

References

Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (2004). *Health literacy: A prescription to end confusion*. Washington, DC: The National Academic Press.