



LITERACY AND HEALTH

Functional health literacy relates the ability level of an individual to access, understand, and participate in health care for the benefit of the individual and his/her dependents. Those who lack basic literacy skills are much more likely than others to suffer from heart disease, diabetes, and prostate cancer and to have health care expenses as much as six times higher than adults with average levels of literacy. Evidence from several studies show that as people gain literacy skills, they are more likely to understand their health problems, have both the confidence and knowledge they need in order to find appropriate medical care, and follow their treatment regimens properly.

Research indicates that low literacy adults:

- 📖 May read medication labels incorrectly.
- 📖 Often can't participate effectively in two-way communications with providers making proper diagnosis and treatment difficult.
- 📖 May not be able to read their appointment slips.
- 📖 Often cannot understand written directions for medicines.
- 📖 Often cannot understand the standard consent form.

SOURCE: *U.S. Adult Literacy Programs: Making a Difference*. ProLiteracy America.

Several studies have shown that, in general, patients with poor reading skills use more health care resources. For one randomly selected group of Medicaid patients, persons with the lowest reading skills had health care expenses that were six times higher than the average for the whole group.

SOURCE: Kefalides, P., "Illiteracy: The Silent Barrier to Health Care," *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 16 Feb., 1999.

Another study reported that of all patients who came to a hospital, patients with inadequate literacy skills were 52% more likely to be hospitalized than other patients.

SOURCE: Williams, M. et al, *Inadequate Functional Health Literacy Among Patients at Two Public Hospitals*, *AMA Journal*, 1995.



There is ample evidence that higher literacy skills correlate with better physical health. It is clear that a more literate society will also be a healthier society and, consequently, a society that incurs significantly lower health care costs.

- 📖 Less educated men and women have an increased rate of homicide and suicide.
- 📖 Low birth weight and infant mortality rates are increased among children of less educated mothers.
- 📖 Mothers with more education are likely to have received early prenatal care.
- 📖 Mothers with less than 12 years of education are 10 times more likely to smoke during pregnancy.
- 📖 Each increase in social position measured by income or education improves the likelihood of being in good health.

SOURCE: Rudd, Rima, Harvard School of Public Health, 2002 Slide Presentation.