

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 health 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.

Low levels of education are also tied to high health care costs for individuals and society, according to research sponsored by the United Health Foundation. Studies found that the states that ranked in the lowest 1/3 of educational attainment, also ranked the lowest on general health care. Florida ranks 35 in education and 42 by health.

SOURCE: US Census Bureau and United Health Foundation

A majority of adults in the U.S. have Intermediate health literacy. Over 75 million adults combined had Basic and Below Basic health literacy. A higher percentage of adults who had not attended or completed high school had Below Basic health literacy than adults with higher levels of education.

According to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy's (NAAL) report on the health literacy of America's adults, 14% of adults have Below Basic Health Literacy skills with an additional 22% functioning at the Basic Health Literacy Level. Over 75 million adults combined have *Basic* and *Below Basic* health literacy. The majority of adults (53%) have *Intermediate* health literacy. 12% of adults have Proficient health literacy.

A higher percentage of adults who had not attended or completed high school had *Below Basic* health literacy than adults with higher levels of education. The study shows that health illiteracy is especially prevalent among: 1) adults who did not complete high school, with 49% having below basic health literacy, and 2) Hispanic adults, who have lower health literacy than any other ethnic/racial group, with 41% having below basic health literacy.

SOURCE: The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

In addition, people with low health literacy:

- incur higher health care costs. A study of Medicaid patients found those reading below the third-grade level had average annual healthcare costs four times those of the overall Medicaid population.
- are often less likely to comply with prescribed treatment and self-care regimens.
- fail to seek preventive care and are at much higher risk for hospitalization.
- remain in the hospital nearly two days longer than adults with higher health literacy.
- often require additional care that results in annual health care costs that are four times higher than for those with higher literacy skills.

SOURCE: Partnership for Clear Health Communication, www.askme3.org

With 1.5 million recipients, approximately 10% of the state's population, the Florida Medicaid program is the nation's fifth largest. Medicaid patients are more than twice as likely as other non-Medicaid patients with the same type of illnesses to be admitted to the hospital via the emergency because of an acute event.

- Patients with low health literacy are more likely to be hospitalized

- They are less likely to obtain preventive health services
- They are more likely to have poor health outcomes
- Annual health care costs for individuals with low literacy are four times higher than those with higher health literacy skills
- Annually, substandard health literacy is responsible for health care costs of more than \$70 billion.

One out of five American adults reads at the 5th grade level or below, and the average American reads at the 8th to 9th grade level, yet most health care materials are written above the 10th grade level. Problems with patient compliance and medical errors may be based on poor understanding of health care information. Only about 50% of all patients take medications as directed.

SOURCE: Pfizer

Most informed consent information is typically written at the 15th grade reading level or above.

SOURCE: http://www.nursingworld.org/ojin/infocol/info_13.htm

Research indicates that low literacy adults:

- 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 from medicines
- Often cannot understand the standard consent form.

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

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.

The inability to understand medicine labels and physicians instructions racks up annually to \$73 million in unnecessary medical bills incurred by patients with low health literacy.

SOURCE: American Medical Association.