

## ***Literacy and Health***

*Literacy is a key determinant of health.*

### **Low literacy, poverty and health problems are interrelated.**

- Literacy barriers limit people's opportunities, resources, control over their lives and ability to make informed choices about their own lifestyle.
- Low literacy affects people's access to decent jobs and adequate incomes. The higher their income, the higher Canadians rate their own health.
- Poverty and low literacy affect nutrition, mental health and the ability to prevent illness.
- People with lower literacy skills are more likely to be under stress.
- Low literacy has a negative effect on all aspects of health, including overall levels of life expectancy, accidents and diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.
- Low literacy makes it difficult for parents to access parenting information, nurture their child's early learning and help them succeed at school.
- People with lower literacy skills are more likely to suffer the consequences of working and living in unsafe or dangerous environments.

### **Low literacy affects access to health services and information.**

- People with lower literacy skills (including people from cultural minorities) may have trouble reading and understanding health information unless it is clearly presented and directly linked to their realities.
- People with low literacy may not have the background health knowledge and vocabulary to understand instructions and information given verbally or in writing.
- Literacy barriers may also exist for those whose first language is not English or French.
- People with low literacy may not know about the services available to them. They can feel powerless and intimidated in relation to health professionals and institutions.

## **Poor health and poverty are barriers to learning and literacy for children and adults.**

- Poor health and other socio-economic factors are real barriers to learning.
- Experience in early years can shape the way children think, behave, respond and learn.
- Older children and youth who have not developed a solid literacy base are at risk for school failure and dropout, anti-social behaviour, poverty and risky lifestyles.

## **Low literacy increases costs to our healthcare system.**






- People with low literacy have poorer overall health.
- Low literacy leads to misuse of medication or misunderstanding of health information.
- Low literacy leads to preventable uses of health services, including emergency care.
- People with low literacy skills often wait longer to seek medical help so health problems reach a crisis state.

## **What can be done**

Literacy and health goals have a better chance for success when pursued together. Literacy programs offer the health system an important channel to reach people who are often most at risk. Health information, in turn, provides a useful learning tool for literacy programs. All Canadians benefit when the needs of low literacy are addressed. An investment in literacy pays off in better health when we:

- increase our understanding of the links between literacy and health
- support children and adults to develop and improve their literacy skills
- develop partnerships between health and literacy organizations
- empower people by using clear language and participatory approaches
- take action on structural factors, such as poverty, that adversely affect both literacy and health

## Suggested *Literacy and Health* Resources

- ✓ **The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA)** the *National Literacy and Health Program* promotes literacy awareness among health professionals. The program works in partnership with national health associations representing health professionals such as nursing, social work, physiotherapy, optometry, palliative care and home care. **Web site:** [www.nlhp.cpha.ca](http://www.nlhp.cpha.ca) ~ **Email:** [nlhp@cpha.ca](mailto:nlhp@cpha.ca) ~ **Phone:** 613-725-3769.
- ✓ **BC Coalition of People with Disabilities (BCCPD) Health Literacy Network** is a province-wide network working to improve access to health information by sharing resources and experience. **Web site:** [www.bccpd.bc.ca/hln/index.html](http://www.bccpd.bc.ca/hln/index.html) ~ **Email:** [hln@bccpd.bc.ca](mailto:hln@bccpd.bc.ca) ~ **Phone:** 1-877-232-7400
-  **Health Canada** is very interested in the needs and issues of less literate Canadians. Visit their website at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) and look under Health Promotion Development for a report called "*How Does Literacy Affect the Health of Canadians?*" as well as other initiatives.
-  **Culture, health and literacy** : a guide to health education materials for adults with limited English literacy skills by Julie McKinney and Sabrina Kurtz-Rossi.
-  **Health and literacy compendium** : an annotated bibliography of print and Web-based health materials for use with limited literacy adults researched and written by Cindy Irvine.
-  **Learning for our health:** a resource for participatory literacy and health education by Mary Norton and Pat Campbell.
-  **How does literacy affect the health of Canadians?** :a profile by Bert Perrin.

 - indicates an item that is in Literacy BC's collection. Visit the collection on-line at <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/catalogue/>

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