



# National Coalition For Literacy

## Health Literacy Fact Sheet

What do we know about the state of adult health literacy in the United States in 2009? How does health literacy affect our communities? This fact sheet, prepared by the National Coalition for Literacy, provides statistics and resources.

### What is health literacy?

Health literacy is defined as:

The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.<sup>i</sup>

### What is the rate of health literacy in the U.S.?

The U.S. Department of Education issued an estimate of the health literacy skills of adults in the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy. The assessment measures adults' abilities to search for, understand, and use health information. Performance is rated on the following scale: Below Basic, Basic, Intermediate and Proficient. The study findings include<sup>ii</sup>:

- Eighty-eight percent of adults aged 16 and older did not have proficient health literacy.
- Four percent of adults with an associate's or 2-year degree and 3 percent of adults with a 4-year college degree or graduate degree are estimated to have Below Basic health literacy.
- Of the adults who never attended or did not complete high school, nearly half (49%) had Below Basic health literacy.
- Adults who were ages 65 and older had lower average health literacy than adults in younger age groups.
- Eighty percent of adults with Below Basic health literacy skills reported getting *none* of their health care information from the Internet.

### Why is health literacy important?

Higher levels of health literacy are associated with more informed decision making by health care consumers, more preventative and maintenance health behaviors, improved self-care and advocacy, and improved communications between health care providers and patients.

- Adults need health literacy skills to speak with medical professionals, access health information, follow dosage instructions, interpret charts, make informed health decisions, and use medical tools for personal or family health care.<sup>iii</sup>
- Persons with limited health literacy skills are more likely to have chronic conditions and are less able to manage them effectively. Studies have found that patients with life threatening diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, and HIV/AIDS, who also have limited health literacy skills, are less knowledgeable of their illness and its management.<sup>iv</sup>
- Persons with limited health literacy skills make greater use of services designed to *treat* complications of disease—such as hospitals and emergency room services—and less use of services designed to *prevent* complications. This higher use is associated with higher healthcare costs.<sup>v</sup>
- The disconnect in the delivery of health information and communication methods of health care providers and the ability of adults to obtain, process and understand health information costs \$106-\$238 billion every year.<sup>vi</sup>

## How can you improve health literacy in the United States?

- Partner with community organizations, blending your teaching expertise with their knowledge of the medical field.
- Be proactive and get involved in health and safety campaigns such as those focused on fitness and wellness, flu vaccine, pre-natal care, and emergency preparedness efforts in your community.
- Advocate for an increased investment in adult and family literacy programs in your community to improve health literacy.

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<sup>i</sup> Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2000). *Healthy People 2010: Understanding and*

*Improving Health*. Washington, DC: US. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.health.gov/healthypeople>

<sup>ii</sup> Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., and Paulsen, C. (2006). *The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2006-483). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006483>

<sup>iii</sup> Nielsen-Bohlman, L., Panzer, A. (2004). *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*. Board on Neuroscience and Behavioral Health, Institute of Medicine. <http://www.iom.edu/?id=19750>

<sup>iv</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. *Quick Guide to Health Literacy*. <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/>

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Vernon, J, Trujillo, A, Rosenbaum, S, DeBuono, B. Oct. (2007) Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy.