



### **National Health Education Week 2011**

#### ***Health Literacy: Gateway to Improving the Public's Health***

##### **Backgrounder**

Health literacy is the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.<sup>1</sup> It has a large impact on health service delivery and the attendant costs.

Health literacy includes the ability to understand instructions on prescription drug bottles, appointment slips, medical education brochures, doctor's directions and consent forms, and the ability to negotiate complex health care systems. Health literacy is not simply the ability to read. It requires a complex group of reading, listening, analytical, and decision-making skills, and the ability to apply these skills to health situations.<sup>2</sup>

According to the American Medical Association, poor health literacy is "a stronger predictor of a person's health than age, income, employment status, education level, and race."<sup>3</sup> In *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, the Institute of Medicine reports that ninety million people in the United States, nearly half the population, have difficulty understanding and using health information. As a result, patients often take medicines on inconsistent schedules, miss follow-up appointments, and do not understand instructions like "take on an empty stomach".<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, a significant gap exists between the high-reading levels of most health materials and the limited literacy skills of many adults. Only 12 percent of consumers have proficient health literacy skills,<sup>1</sup> which mean that nearly nine out of ten adults may lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease. Moreover, the complexity of today's health system and the overwhelming amount of health information available make it increasingly difficult for consumers to understand written health materials and access health services.

Deficiencies in national health literacy impact our nation's physical – and financial – health. One study estimates the cost of limited health literacy to the Nation's economy to be \$106 and \$236 billion U.S. dollars annually.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between literacy and health is complex. Literacy impacts health knowledge, health status, and access to health services. Health status is influenced by several related socioeconomic factors. Literacy impacts income level, occupation, education, housing, and access to medical care. The poor and illiterate are more likely to work under hazardous conditions or be exposed to environmental toxins.<sup>5</sup>

Reasons for limited literacy skills include:

- Lack of educational opportunity - people with less than a high school education
- Learning disabilities
- Cognitive declines in older adults
- Use it or lose it - reading abilities are typically three to five grade levels below the last year of school completed. Therefore, people with a high school diploma, typically read at a seventh or eighth grade reading level.<sup>5</sup>

Vulnerable populations include:

- Minority populations
- Refugee and immigrant populations
- People with incomes at or below the poverty line
- People with chronic mental and/or physical health conditions
- Elderly (age 65+)<sup>5</sup>

After adjusting for health status, education level, socioeconomic status, and other demographics factors, people with low functional literacy have less ability to care for chronic conditions and use more health care services.<sup>5</sup>

## References

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4. Bohlman, L., Panzer, A. M., & Kindig, D. A. (2004). *Health literacy: a prescription to end confusion*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.
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