

Health Literacy

Health literacy is “how well a person can get the health information and services that they need, how well they understand them, and using them to make good health decisions.”¹

“Health literacy is more than being able to read health information and complete medical forms. Even people with strong literacy skills may not be able to cope with the demands of learning in the health care context, especially when they are made more vulnerable by poor health.”^{2,3}

Who has Low Health Literacy?

- 55% of Canadians aged 16 to 65
- 88% of Canadians over the age of 65
- Vulnerable individuals including many:
 - o With lower socioeconomic or education status;
 - o Who do not speak English or French well.⁴

Although some groups have higher rates of health literacy, **anyone can experience low health literacy at any time**. Even highly educated people who can read very well can experience low health literacy. Your emotions, including stress, can affect how well you understand and remember information.

What is the impact of Low Health Literacy?

Low health literacy is associated with:

- poorer health
- chronic illness such as diabetes
- poor ability to understand health messages and labels
- medication errors
- lower use of preventative services such as mammography and vaccination
- more use of emergency services
- increased risk of hospitalization⁴

How can I make sure my patients understand what I'm telling them?

1. Use plain, everyday language familiar to your patient. Break information into small chunks.
2. Use “universal precautions” and assume every patient may have trouble with low health literacy at some point.
3. Use “Teach Back” in every patient encounter, where appropriate, to confirm understanding.⁵
4. Create a welcoming and supportive environment where patients feel comfortable and safe to ask questions

Where can I find more information on Health Literacy?

[What is Health Literacy? ABC Life Literacy Canada](#)

[Health Literacy Key Facts, World Health Organization](#)

[Health Literacy, Centre for Disease Control](#)

[Health Literacy - Creating Patient Education Resources - LibGuides at Nova Scotia Health](#)

[Teach Back – what, why, and how to do it well, University of British Columbia](#)

Questions?

Contact the PFPX Team to help plan engagement that's inclusive, respectful, and impactful.

Email: patientexp@bccancer.bc.ca

Fill out a [request form](#)

References

1. Medline Plus – Health literacy. Available from: <https://medlineplus.gov/healthliteracy.html> [Accessed September 2018]
2. Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario. Facilitating Client Centred Learning. Clinical Best Practice Guidelines. Toronto: Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario; 2012. Available from https://rnao.ca/sites/rnao-ca/files/BPG_CCL_2012_FA.pdf [Accessed March 2025]
3. Nielsen-Bohlman, L., Panzer, A. & Kindig, D. (Eds.). Health Literacy: A prescription to end confusion. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2004. Available from <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/10883/health-literacy-a-prescription-to-end-confusion> [Accessed March 2025]
4. Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc. Health Literacy Fact Sheets. Available from: http://www.chcs.org/media/CHCS_Health_Literacy_Fact_Sheets_2013_1.pdf [Accessed April 2017].
5. Always use Teach-Back. Available from: <https://teachbacktraining.org/> [Accessed Sept 2025]