What is Health Literacy?

Health literacy is “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (Selden, Zorn, Ratzan, & Parker, 2000). The National Assessment of Adult Literacy revealed that the percentage of adults with proficient health literacy is only 12% (National Assessment of Adult Literacy as cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.).

Who Lacks Health Literacy?

There is no discrete profile of a person who lacks basic health literacy. Hearing the spoken vocabulary of individuals is not an indicator. Those who lack health literacy are not able to:

- Determine what time a person can take a prescription medication, based on information on the prescription drug label that relates the timing of medication to eating.
- Identify three substances that may interact with an over-the-counter drug to cause side effects, using information on the over-the-counter drug label.
- Give two reasons why a person with no symptoms of a specific disease should be tested for the disease, based on information on a clearly written pamphlet. (Weiss, 2007, p.9).

Some, but not all people who lack health literacy also lack basic literacy skills. Those who lack literacy skills may be found amongst the elderly, individuals who earn a low income, are unemployed, or did not finish high school, minorities, and those who do not speak English or speak English as a second language (Lambert, 2009).

Strategies for Improving Health Literacy

Raise awareness. Share the facts about the lack of health literacy in the United States. Take action. Work with local health care providers, hospitals and other health centers to improve the usability of health information and health services.
Partner with local educators. Suggest the addition or enhancement of health education in the curriculum of school-aged children, adults learning English as a second language, and that of other learning environments. Teach someone to read--volunteer with a local literacy council.

Current Information About Health Literacy

**AMA Health Literacy News**

Health literacy in the news as compiled by the American Medical Association (AMA).

**Health Literacy Podcasts**
http://www.healthliteracy.com/
This site contains podcasts during which guest speakers talk about innovative work they are doing to promote health communication. The interviewer is Helen Osborne, Health Literacy Consultant and founder of Health Literacy Month. Download or listen online.

**Herschel S. Horowitz Center for Health Literacy at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Health**
http://sph.umd.edu/literacy/index.cfm
This center is the nation's first academic based health literacy center. It hosts a speaker series and a brown bag series. The site provides links to additional resources.

**Listserv of the Roundtable on Health Literacy of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies**
http://www8.nationalacademies.org/mail_list/default.asp?list_id=856&action=subscribe
This group has a focus on health literacy research. Read about the Roundtable's reports and other activities at http://www.iom.edu/Activities/PublicHealth/HealthLiteracy.aspx

**PubMed Article Feed from Sherman Cohn Library at Maryland University of Integrative Health**
http://www.muih.edu/campus-community/about-campus/sherman-cohn-library/current-articles
The Library has created an RSS Feed that shows articles from PubMed that are on the topic of health literacy.

**Reference List**


