

Literacy and Health

What is literacy?

Literacy is the way we understand and use print material at work, at home and in the community. Literacy also means being connected to your language and culture.



What is health?

Health is more than sickness or injury – health is a person’s physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being.



How is health related to literacy?

A person’s health is related to their literacy levels. A person who has trouble reading may not be able to read a bottle label well enough to know how much medicine to give their child. A person with low literacy skills often has a much lower income. They may also have trouble finding and using health information. Families who live in poverty often have low birth weight babies. Poverty can also cause problems that make it difficult for children to learn.

Some of the direct impacts of low literacy levels on health are:

- ❑ Not being able to understand medical directions;
- ❑ Using medicines incorrectly;

- ❑ Mixing and using infant formula incorrectly;
- ❑ Safety risks in the workplace.

Some of the indirect impacts are:

- ❑ Higher risk of being unemployed;
- ❑ Higher risk of being injured on the job;
- ❑ Leading an unhealthy lifestyle – poor nutrition, smoking, excess drinking, lack of physical exercise;
- ❑ Inability to find and use health information;
- ❑ Higher levels of stress.

Low literacy skills can cause stress and the loss of self confidence. This can make it difficult for people to talk to doctors and nurses.



What can we do to help?

- ❑ Understand the link between literacy and health;
- ❑ Support children and adults to improve their literacy skills;
- ❑ Use clear language in pamphlets, posters and newsletters and when talking about health issues;
- ❑ Use health issues as a topic to teach literacy classes or vice versa;
- ❑ Understand that low literacy levels may make it difficult for people to understand and follow medical instructions.