Who Has Health Literacy Problems?

Health literacy problems affect people from all backgrounds, especially those with chronic health problems.

Older people, non-whites, immigrants, and those with low incomes are disproportionately more likely to have trouble reading and understanding health-related information.

- According to the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS):¹
  - 66% of U.S. adults age 60 and over have inadequate or marginal literacy skills.
  - 50% of welfare recipients read below fifth-grade level.
  - 50% of Hispanic Americans and 40% of African Americans have reading problems.

- Inadequate literacy was an independent risk factor for hospital admission among 3,260 elderly managed care enrollees.²

- Health literacy problems were independently associated with worse glycemic control among 408 English- and Spanish-speaking patients with diabetes.³

Those with poor health literacy are more likely to have a chronic disease and less likely to get the health care they need.

- According to the NALS,¹ 75% of Americans who reported having a long-term illness (six months or more) had limited literacy. This may mean they know less about their conditions or how to handle symptoms.

- Emergency room patients with inadequate literacy are twice as likely to be hospitalized as those with adequate literacy — even after adjusting for self-reported health, health insurance, and socioeconomic characteristics (32% vs. 15% in a study of 979 patients).⁴

Patient Knowledge about their Chronic Disease by Level of Functional Health Literacy⁵

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypertension</th>
<th>Diabetes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patients with hypertension who knew that exercise lowers blood pressure (n=402)*</td>
<td>Patients with diabetes who knew that they should eat some form of sugar if feeling shaky, sweaty and hungry (n=114)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.001, ** p<.002

But "You can't tell by looking."

Even practitioners who have worked with low-literacy patients for years are often surprised at the poor reading skills of some of their most poised and articulate patients.⁶

- Two-thirds of 58 patients who admitted having reading difficulties had never told their spouse. Nine of them had told no one.⁷
- Physicians at a women’s health clinic could identify only 20% of their patients who were at the lowest literacy level (<third grade).⁸

### References


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All Health Literacy Fact Sheets are available at www.chcsonline.org

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