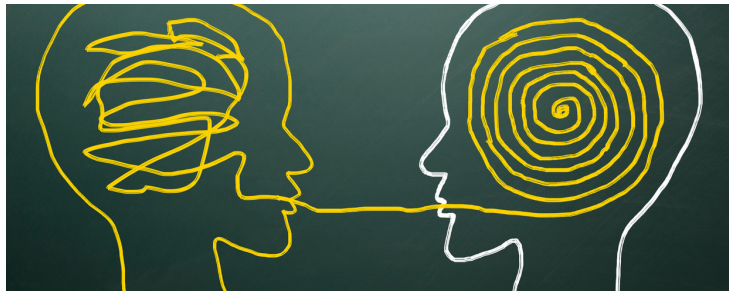


HEALTH LITERACY

PUBLIC HEALTH BRIEF

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WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?³

Health literacy is the ability to obtain, read, and understand health and healthcare information and use that to make appropriate decisions and follow medical orders as they are given.

There are 2 types of health literacy:

Personal - the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.

Organizational - the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.

WHO IS AFFECTED BY HEALTH LITERACY?³

Health literacy affects everyone because it is essential not only for the patient to understand the information they are receiving but also for the physicians and other medical personnel involved. Even those who may read and write at a normal or professional level can face health literacy issues.

This can be due to:

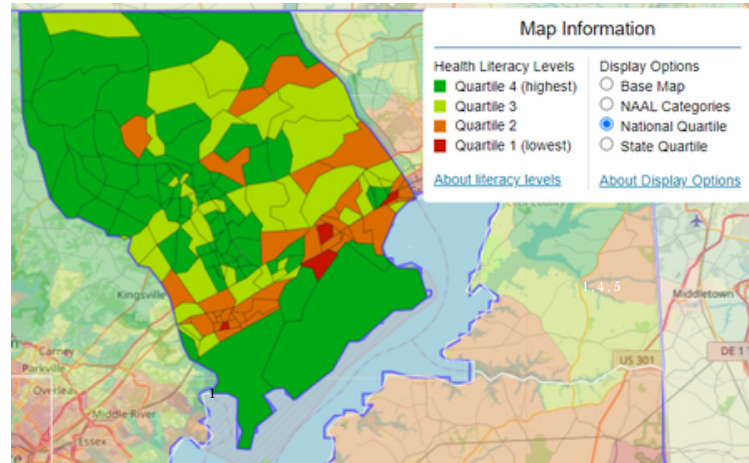
- Unfamiliarity with medical terms or how their bodies work
- Interpreting statistics
- Evaluating risks and benefits
- Confused or scared about what is next
- Unfamiliar with how to perform self-care

WHY IS HEALTH LITERACY IMPORTANT?⁴

Health literacy is important because ultimately, the patient makes the final decision about any medical plan, treatment, or procedure. The patient should know and understand every single detail of the course of action that their physician is recommending. If they do not understand, they make a decision because they feel pressured to or may decide not to proceed with a medical plan because they are unsure it is safe.

Sources:
 1. National Health Literacy Mapping to Inform Health Care Policy (2014). Health Literacy Data Map. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://healthliteracymap.unc.edu/>
 2. U.S. Census Bureau
 3. Center for Disease Control & Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/Understanding.html>
 4. Rasmussen University. <https://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/health-sciences/blog/importance-of-health-literacy/>
 5. Erie Health. <https://www3.erie.gov/health/health-literacy>
 6. The Lancet. [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpub/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30086-4.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpub/PIIS2468-2667(20)30086-4.pdf)

DATA^{1,2}



Health literacy levels in Harford County are mostly within the higher quartiles, meaning they can understand basic health information with little guidance, but there are still some areas with lower rates. Aberdeen, Edgewood, Joppatowne, Havre de Grace, and Darlington are some areas with lower health literacy levels, meaning they cannot understand basic health information like reading a pamphlet on a medical condition. The areas that have low literacy also coincide with lower graduation rates and lower education levels.

SPOTLIGHT:⁶ HEALTH LITERACY DURING COVID PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic circled around tons of misinformation about safe practices, such as mask use and vaccinations. A large portion of these misunderstandings was due to low health literacy. In 2020, thousands of sources were releasing information about COVID-19 and a large portion of this was most likely misinformation, as it was such a new and hard-to-understand infectious disease. Due to the immensity of misinformation being released daily, it was easy for the public to believe a method that may not have been the safest to practice. Those who concluded that masks or vaccinations would not prevent the spread of COVID-19 had a higher risk of contracting the disease as well as the results that follow, such as hospitalizations or death. Higher levels of health literacy may have helped the public grasp the reasons behind the recommendations and guidelines a bit better during the COVID-19 pandemic.

HOW TO IMPROVE HEALTH LITERACY⁵

An individual can improve health literacy by asking more questions, repeating all information back to the provider in their own words to ensure that they understand the information correctly, or bringing someone who may have more knowledge so that they are there for support.

WHAT CAN AN ORGANIZATION DO TO SUPPORT HEALTH LITERACY?⁵

1. Keep it conversational and casual
2. Use concise language
3. Write for your specific audience
4. Choose words carefully
5. Organize information