

Health Literacy: Frequently Asked Questions

What is Health Literacy?

Health literacy is about people having enough knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence to be able to use health and care information and services. Health literacy can be broken down to three parts:

1. People's skills, knowledge, understanding and confidence
2. How people use health services
3. How those health services, and the people that work in them, meet people's individual needs

This means health literacy is very important to enabling people to be involved in their health and in staying healthy and well.

Is health literacy really a big issue?

Studies suggest that everyday health information is too difficult for 43% of 16-65 year olds to be able to understand and use. This increases to 61% when numerical information is included. For example, many people will struggle to calculate a childhood paracetamol dose. This means, having health literacy can really affect a person's ability to stay healthy and well.

What are the policy and strategic drivers for addressing health literacy?

The NHS Constitution says that health literacy is an important part of high quality health services. It says services should offer easily accessible, reliable information in a form that people can use and understand.

The Five Year Forward View also says that health literacy is important. It says that health services should be person-centred, support people to be healthier, and enable people to be informed and involved in their care. It says that effective care planning and the use of volunteers to educate people in the management of long-term conditions will both help to achieve this

Is health literacy the same as patient activation?

Patient activation is the knowledge, skills and confidence an individual has to take a more active role in managing their health and care. Health literacy builds on this to include the relationship between people's knowledge, skills and confidence, and their ability to access, understand, evaluate and use health and care information and services. As such, without being health literate, an individual cannot fully utilise their knowledge, skills and confidence to actively use health and social care services. Together, patient activation and health literacy provide the framework through which we can truly ensure that individuals are empowered to be fully involved in their health.

What is the link between Health Literacy and Health Inequalities?

There is a strong connection between lower levels of health literacy and health inequality. Health literacy contributes to health inequalities because people with higher health literacy needs also have

poorer health outcomes. This means, interventions should be tailored towards people with lower levels of health literacy so we can be confident we are tackling health inequalities.

How does having health literacy needs affect how people use the NHS?

People with greater health literacy needs;

- May not know which health service to use and when. For example, when to visit their GP, ring NHS 111 or attend Accident and Emergency services.
- Are not always able to gain the right treatment
- Generally, enter the health system when they are sicker and are more likely to use emergency services. This means they have higher healthcare costs and have worse health outcomes
- Are less likely to use preventive services such as immunisation and cancer screening programmes
- Are less likely to be able to follow medication requirements

How does having greater health literacy needs affect a person's health?

Studies have shown that people with greater health literacy needs:

- Have an increased risk of illness and premature death
- Are less likely to be able to manage long-term conditions well
- Have a greater likelihood of being admitted to hospital and they tend to stay in hospital for longer
- Are 1.5-3 times more likely to die earlier than those that are more health-literate
- Are more likely to display unhealthy lifestyle behaviours, such as smoking and drinking
- Use services less because they feel embarrassed about their skill level
- May not trust medical professionals and have general negative attitudes towards services

Why can it be difficult for clinical and other staff to identify and respond to health literacy needs?

An individual's health literacy needs can be difficult to identify and respond to for two reasons. Firstly, some people will use effective coping mechanisms to hide their needs and/or may not admit they haven't understood something. Secondly, awareness of health literacy is still growing and training for staff is not always provided. This means staff may not know what health literacy needs are, or how they or the service they deliver, can address them.

Why is addressing health literacy important?

Addressing health literacy is important because it:

- Will reduce health inequalities
- Enables people to understand and use health and care information
- Improves mental health
- Increases health knowledge and skills
- Supports people to follow medication
- Increases individuals confidence as well as their involvement and engagement in their health
- Empowers people to effectively manage long-term conditions

Is it just about reading?

No, health literacy is about far more than the ability to read, although this is part of it. There are three parts to health literacy:

1. People's skills, knowledge, understanding and confidence
2. How people use health services
3. How those health services, and the people that work in them, meet people's individual needs

Would making everything easy read and plain English solve it?

Put simply, no. This is because health literacy also includes how confident people feel, how people use health services and how those health services and the people that work in them meet people's individual needs. However, ensuring all information is easy to understand is good practice.

What can we do about it?

Health literacy covers a lot of different things. This means it is important that NHS England works together with other organisations. Work to improve health literacy needs to include the health literacy of individuals and population groups, as well as looking at how services are delivered. Examples include delivering community-based learning programmes and commissioning organisations who deliver services that are health literate.

What have we done so far?

NHS England is now in the process of formalising its approach to health literacy. We have already formed the Health Literacy Collaborative; a group of interested parties whose work directly impacts on health literacy and who are best placed to implement effective interventions. Membership includes Public Health England, Health Education England and the UK Health Literacy Group. Using this collaborative approach, NHS England hopes to assemble both the evidence and activity to establish best practice and identify gaps. A detailed action plan for implementing this work is currently being formulated.

I'd like to know more – where do I go?

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