



Health and Literacy

Health Literacy: more than words on paper

According to the *World Health Organization*, **Health** is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being; not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Literacy is a key determinant of health.

Health literacy goes beyond reading the words on a page. It is the individual's ability to obtain, process and understand the basic health information and services needed to make sound health decisions. Health literacy is also about how the health care, education and other systems in society provide information and services that respect and accommodate the background of the user.

Health Literacy in Nova Scotia

In 2004, the **Health Literacy in Rural Nova Scotia Research Project** published its final report: *Taking Off the Blindfold*. Based on research done in rural Nova Scotia, the report makes specific recommendations to improve the state of health literacy in the province.

The recommendations include, among others:

- more and better learning opportunities.
- better supports and clearer information from the health care system.
- stronger social support networks.
- recognition of cultural and regional differences.

As a result of this report, the Nova Scotia departments of health and education have come together to develop a provincial **Health Literacy Awareness Initiative** to help raise awareness among health care providers about the links between literacy and health.

Health Literacy Challenges

People with low literacy levels are more likely to:

- find nutritious food out of their price range.
- have difficulty using the complex health care system.
- be employed in dangerous jobs and be vulnerable to injury.
- experience chronic stress that impairs the immune system.
- get less preventive health care.
- use expensive health care services, such as emergency departments, more often.

Health Literacy Solutions

In order to improve health literacy in Nova Scotia we need:

- a better understanding of the relationship between literacy and health.
- adult educators to include health literacy materials and topics in their programs.
- easily accessible health information that recognizes the users' learning style.
- health literacy to be part of the training of all health professionals.
- to understand that health literacy is useful to everyone, including those with limited literacy skills.

Resources: Institute of Medicine: *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion* (2004) <http://www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=19723> ♦ Taking off the Blindfold: www.nald.ca/healthliteracystfx ♦ Health Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca ♦ World Health Organization: www.who.int ♦ Health Literacy Awareness Initiative www.gov.ns/health/primaryhealthcare

Literacy Nova Scotia is Nova Scotia's provincial literacy coalition.

Our mission is to make sure every Nova Scotian has equal access to quality literacy education.

Learn Line 1-800-255-5203 Ph. 1-(902) 897-2444 Email: literacyns@nsc.ca Web: www.ns.literacy.ca