

## Health Literacy – The Costs of Not Knowing

Do you understand the hand-out sheets given to you by the pharmacist when you pick up your medication? When you read the label on a cold or headache medication, do you know for sure how much to take? Do you know when a medication is not appropriate for you? When you leave your doctor's office, are you sure about what your doctor told you?

If you or someone you know answered "No" to these questions, you – or they - may have a problem with "health literacy" skills. Health literacy can be defined as a person's "capacity to find, understand and use basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions." Having low health literacy skills has significant implications on the health and well-being of the person, but also on the health care system as a whole.

Who is most likely to have low health literacy skills? The largest numbers in this category are people over age 65, recent immigrants and those with low income, low education or low capacity in English or French. By one estimate, more than half of working age adults in Canada (11.7 million people) have less than adequate health literacy skills, including 88% of adults over the age of 65 (3.1 million people).

Studies have shown that adults with limited literacy skills are less likely to be able to manage chronic diseases and more likely to be hospitalized. Persons with limited health literacy skills are more likely to skip important preventive measures such as mammograms and flu shots, and to enter the healthcare system when they are sicker. Patients with low health literacy skills have a higher rate of "preventable" hospital visits, higher rates of hospital admissions, and higher use of emergency health services.

Of course, there are two sides to the health care system: the patient and the health care system provider, and both have a responsibility to improve health literacy. According to a survey done by the Canadian Public Health Association, many health professionals are unsure of the literacy levels of their clients. In another study, only 25% of hospital doctors identified that low health literacy skills could explain a hospital readmission in a case study that had clues indicating this problem. In Montreal, pamphlets in doctors' offices were found to be written for people who were able to read at almost a grade 12 level, even though most patients had a much lower reading level.

When health literacy improved, benefits included improved communication, greater ability to follow through with treatment, greater ability to engage in self-care, and improved health status resulting in greater efficiency and cost savings to the health system as a whole.

So what does low health literacy cost us? There is the human cost that shows in the link between poverty, low literacy, and health. For the low-income person with low health literacy skills, there will be a strong likelihood of poorer health outcomes.

As for costs to our community and the health care system of low health literacy, dollar figure estimates are hard to find. However, a 2007 report from the University of Connecticut estimated the cost of low health literacy to the United States economy as between \$106-\$236 billion annually and that savings generated from improved health literacy would be enough to insure all 47 million persons who lacked health insurance coverage in the United States in 2006.

What can you do to improve your own health literacy? Daily reading of any sort will improve your skills. When you deal with a health care provider, getting the answers to these three questions will help you make appropriate decisions:

1. What is my main problem?
2. What do I need to do?
3. Why is it important for me to do this?