

Health Literacy Facts & Figures

Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy

This nationwide survey asked 19,000 adults to perform reading tasks in three health domains: clinical, prevention, and navigation of the healthcare system. There were four levels of task difficulty:

- Below basic. One of the tasks was to circle the date of a medical appointment.
- Basic. One of the tasks was to read a clearly-written booklet and then give two reasons why someone with no symptoms should be tested for this condition.
- Intermediate. One of the tasks was to determine a healthy weight using a BMI graph.
- Proficient. One of the tasks was to use a table to calculate an employee's share of health insurance costs.

Overall, adults scored at: 14% below basic, 22% basic, 53% intermediate, 12% proficient. Significant differences include:

- Older adults (65 years, or over): 59% scored at basic, or below
- Black adults: 58% scored at basic, or below
- Hispanic adults: 66% scored at basic, or below
- People with less than/some high school education: 76% scored at basic, or below

Other recent reports and research:

- Inadequate health literacy, as measured by reading fluency, had a strong, independent association with mortality even after adjusting for an extensive set of covariates." (Baker, et al. 2007)
- "70% of patients with low literacy correctly stated the instructions 'take two pills by mouth daily' but only 35% could demonstrate the number of pills to be taken daily." (Davis, 2006)
- "60% of the people could not correctly calculate the number of carbohydrates in ½ bagel when the serving size is a whole bagel." (Rothman, 2006)
- "Among women with abnormal Pap smear, those perceived by their physician to have low literacy were significantly more likely to fail to present for follow-up." (Lindau, 2006)
- "The safety of patients cannot be assured without mitigating the negative effects of low health literacy and ineffective communications on patient care." (JCAHO, 2007).
- "Low health literacy presents a risk to patients, providers, and the U.S. health care system as a whole." (AMA Foundation, 2007)
- "Low health literacy is a major source of economic inefficiency in the U. S. healthcare system. An initial approximation places the order of magnitude of the cost of low health literacy in the range of \$106 - \$238 billion annually. This represents between 7-17% of all personal healthcare expenditures." (Vernon, 2007)