



## Facts about literacy and health

### A person with low literacy is more likely to...

- ◆ have trouble following instructions for a diabetic diet
- ◆ give the wrong amount of medicine to a sick child
- ◆ find nutritious food out of his or her price range
- ◆ be employed in a dangerous job
- ◆ have difficulty filling out medical forms
- ◆ get less preventive health care
- ◆ use expensive health care services, such as emergency departments, more often.

The more comfortable we are using print, the better we will understand health information. When health care facilities and health workers use words or give information in clear language, we are all more likely to get what we need.

*6 in 10 Nova Scotians understand printed information well enough to make informed decisions about their own or their family's health.*

### Health and literacy are critical resources for everyday living.

According to the World Health Organization, **health** is a state of physical, mental and social well-being, not just the absence of disease or infirmity.

**Literacy is a key determinant of health.** We are more likely to make healthy decisions when we have adequate literacy skills.

### What is health literacy?

Health literacy is how easily we can get and understand the basic health information and services we need to make sound health decisions.

It is determined not only by our own skills and abilities, but by the skills, preferences and expectations of care

providers: our doctors, nurses, administrators, home health workers and many others. The way health information is presented to us by caregivers, institutions and the media has a major impact on how well we can understand and use it.

In 2004, the **Health Literacy in Rural Nova Scotia Research Project** published its final report: *Taking Off the Blindfold*. Recommendations to improve health literacy include more and better learning opportunities, better supports and clearer information from the health care system, stronger social support networks and recognition of cultural and regional differences. As a result, the Nova Scotia Departments of Health and Education have developed a provincial **Health Literacy Awareness Initiative** to raise awareness among health care providers about links between literacy and health.

### Fact

*Nova Scotians have higher rates of chronic disease than other Canadians. They face more socioeconomic conditions that increase the risk of chronic disease, such as limited education and income.*

*Literacy... more than words on paper.*



## What is literacy?

Literacy is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family. It is the combination of thinking and social skills we need to analyze and use information to control our lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

Literacy Nova Scotia (LNS) supports the literacy community in Nova Scotia. Our mission is to ensure that every Nova Scotian has equal access to quality literacy education.

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*Funding for the development and distribution of this document was provided by the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program of Human Resources and Social Development Canada.*

## What is the link between literacy and health?

Poor health and other socioeconomic factors can hurt our ability to learn. People with higher levels of literacy can make more money, live in a better place, prepare their children to learn in school and look after their health better. They are less likely to smoke. They exercise more and eat healthier foods.

Better health leads to higher literacy in older children. They are less likely to fail or drop out of school or to be poor.

Literacy helps build safer neighbourhoods by breaking the cycle of poverty and encouraging community involvement.

### Fact

*80% of Nova Scotians 65 and over have low literacy. About 50% of Canadian seniors report having poor physical health. 16 to 65 year-olds in poor health have lower than average literacy scores.*

(IALSS 2003)

## How can we invest in health literacy?

- ◆ Make health information part of literacy programs.
- ◆ Make health literacy part of training for all health professionals.
- ◆ Increase understanding of the links between literacy and health.
- ◆ Provide easily accessible health information in clear language.
- ◆ Support children and adults to develop better literacy skills.
- ◆ Develop partnerships among health and literacy groups.
- ◆ Attack poverty, which negatively impacts both literacy and health.

## What are the benefits of better health literacy?

- ◆ Learning about health issues is a good way to practice reading, writing, speaking, and math.
- ◆ By learning about health issues, learners develop skills and knowledge to improve their lives.
- ◆ Increasing literacy skills leads to better health.
- ◆ Better health makes it easier to learn.