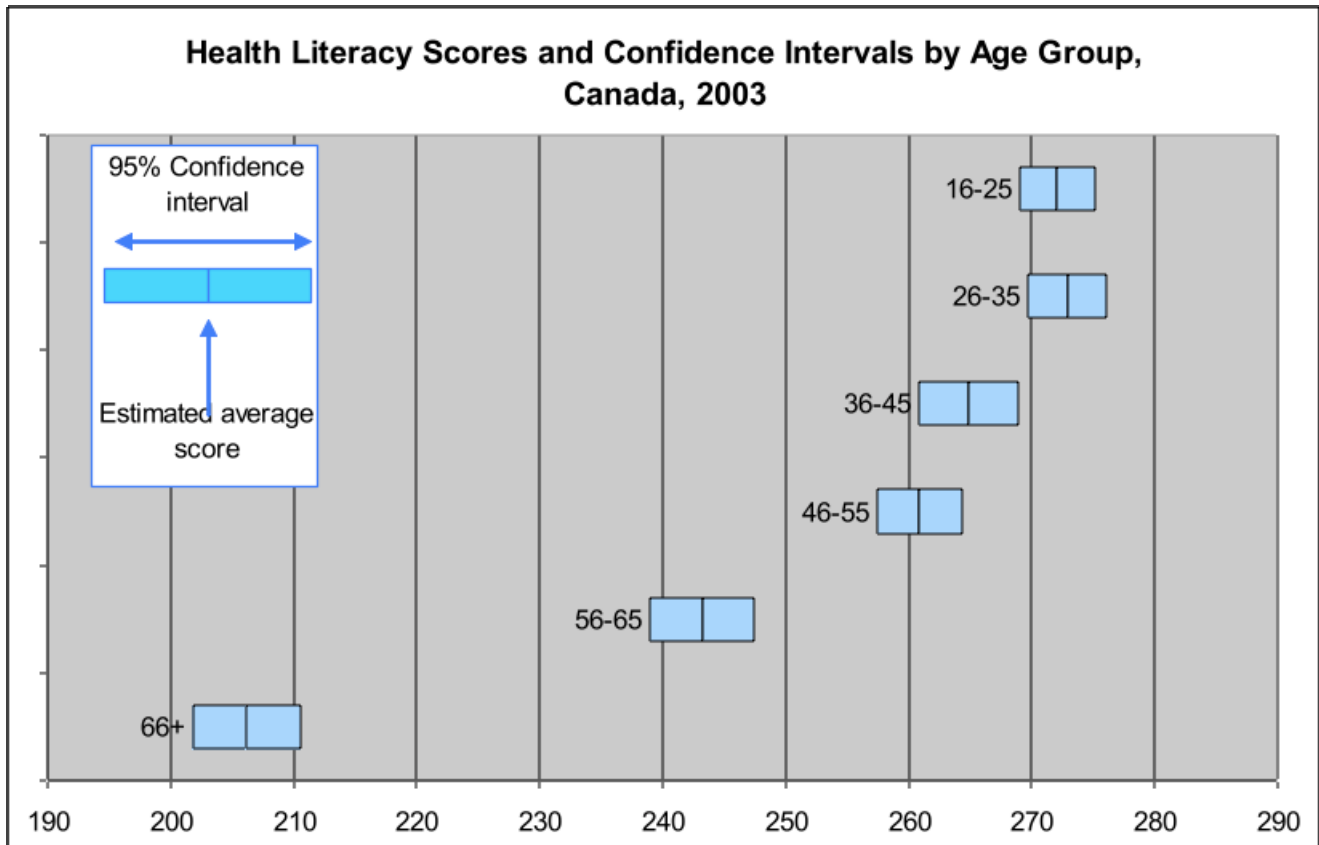


## Health Literacy in Aging Populations

Health literacy emerges when the expectations, preferences, and skills of individuals seeking health information and services meet the expectations, skills and preferences of those providing information and services – Institute of Medicine, 2004

Health literacy is important because better health literacy leads to fewer health problems and safer care and those receiving and providing care have better experiences.

### How common are problems with health literacy in older people?



Source: Health Literacy in Canada: A Healthy Understanding, CCL, 2008, based on IALSS 2003. Lower scores indicated limited health literacy.

- Older people are much more likely to have low health literacy scores
- About half of all Canadians over age 16, or 12 million people, have difficulty understanding and acting upon written or verbal health information. About 88% of adults over age 65 have below basic health literacy levels.<sup>i</sup>
- The picture is about the same in British Columbia<sup>ii</sup>

### How much do problems with health literacy cost?

- Using an estimate of 5% of total health care costs due to limited health literacy<sup>iii</sup>, limited health literacy costs the Canadian economy an estimated \$6.5 billion dollars each year.

- About 77% of Canadian seniors have at least one chronic condition,<sup>iv</sup> which requires daily decision-making about health concerns and increases the number of interactions with the health care system, further increasing demands on health literacy. Chronic health problems currently cost more than \$80 billion each year.<sup>v</sup>
- A recent review of studies found that 62% of patients with lower reading skill levels were unable or unwilling to engage in self-management<sup>vi</sup>.

### **Why is aging associated with lower health literacy?**

- less opportunity for higher education<sup>vii</sup>
- lower income<sup>vii</sup>
- slower processing time for new information<sup>viii</sup>
- increased incidence of mild cognitive impairment and dementia<sup>vii</sup>
- worse health status<sup>vii</sup>
- increased prevalence of vision and hearing impairment<sup>vii</sup>

### **Effects of lower health literacy on the elderly**

In the United States, these same factors add up to create the following:

- Fewer older adults receive preventive services, such as vaccines and screening tests<sup>ix</sup>
- Older adults are less likely to seek treatment when needed<sup>x</sup>
- Low health literacy predicts increased death rate<sup>xi xii</sup>

### **What predicts health literacy in older adults?**

- A recent Canadian study found that enabling factors such as formal education, life-long and life-wide learning were the best predictors of health literacy among older adults. Measures of enabling factors that were strongly related to health literacy included education level; self-study in the form of reading manuals, reference books and journals; computer/Internet use; use of the library; leisure reading of books; reading letters, notes and emails; and volunteerism.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **What can be done?**

- Increasing health literacy can improve health status and decrease hospital and emergency room use<sup>xiv</sup>
- A coordinated approach involving seniors' groups, libraries, health promotion agencies, and health care providers to promote computer/internet learning and foster reading of books, magazines and other health literature as well as other forms of learning may be helpful.<sup>xv</sup>
- Training of health workers to provide support to seniors with lower levels of literacy and health literacy through such means as clear communication, building relationships of trust and awareness of community resources.<sup>xvi</sup>

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Statistics Canada (2005) *Building on our competencies: Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Cat No. 89-617-XIE. Available at [www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-617-XIE/89-617-XIE2005001.pdf](http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-617-XIE/89-617-XIE2005001.pdf)
- <sup>ii</sup> Canadian Council on Learning (2008) *Health literacy in Canada: A healthy understanding*. Available at <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/HealthLiteracy/HealthLiteracyReportFeb2008E.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> Eichler K et al. (2009) *The costs of limited health literacy: a systematic review*. *Inter J Publ Health* 54:313-324
- <sup>iv</sup> Health Council of Canada (2007). *Why health care renewal matters: Learning from Canadians with chronic health care conditions*. Available at [www.healthcouncilcanada.ca](http://www.healthcouncilcanada.ca)
- <sup>v</sup> Health Canada (1998). *Economic burden of illness in Canada*. Available at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ebic-femc98/pdf/ebic1998.pdf>
- <sup>vi</sup> Johnston L, Ammary N., Epstein, L, Johnson, R, Rhee, K. (2006). A Transdisciplinary Approach to Improve Health Literacy and Reduce Disparities. *Health Promotion Practice*, 3.
- <sup>vii</sup> Statistics Canada (2006) *A portrait of seniors in Canada*. Available at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-519-x/89-519-x2006001-eng.pdf>
- <sup>viii</sup> Salzman, Brooke. (2006) *Myths and realities of aging*. *Care Management Journals* Vol 7(3);141-150.
- <sup>ix</sup> Baker DW et al (2000) *The association between age and health literacy among elderly persons*. *J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci*. 55(6):S368-374.
- <sup>x</sup> Baker DW et al (2004). *Health literacy and use of outpatient physician services by Medicare managed care enrollees*. *Journal of Gen Inter Med* 19(3):215-220.
- <sup>xi</sup> Sudore RL et al (2006) *Limited literacy and mortality in the elderly*. *J Gen Inter Med*. 21:806-812.
- <sup>xii</sup> Baker DW et al (2007) *Health literacy and mortality among older persons*. *Arch Inter Med* 167(14):1503-1509.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wister, AV, et al. (2010) *Life-long educational practices and resources in enabling health literacy among older adults*, *The Journal of Aging and Health*, in press.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Cho YI et al (2008) *Effects of health literacy on health status and health service utilization amongst the elderly*. *Soc Sci Med* 66(8):1809-1816.
- <sup>xv</sup> Wister, AV, et al. (2010) *Life-long educational practices and resources in enabling health literacy among older adults*, *The Journal of Aging and Health*, in press.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Improving Health Literacy in Communities: Guide to Ideas (2010)* available at [www.impactbc.ca](http://www.impactbc.ca)