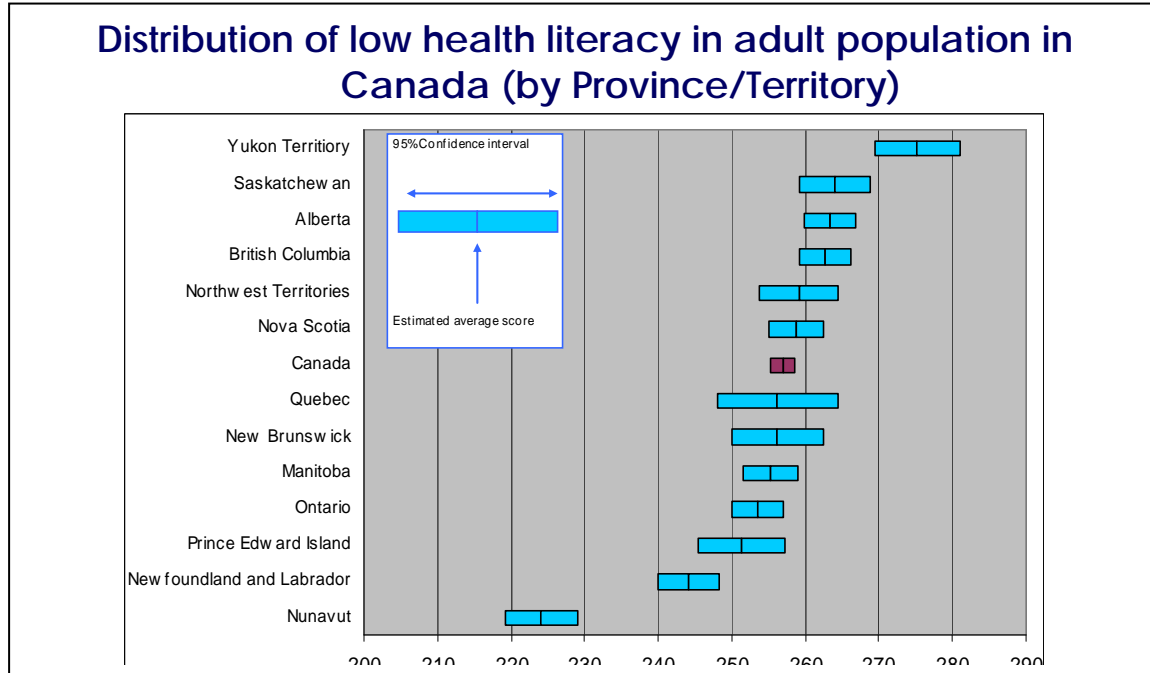


Health Literacy and Increased Health Care Costs

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

How common is limited health literacy?



Source: Health Literacy in Canada: Initial Results, 2007b, CCL, based on IALSS 2003

- An estimated 11.7 million working age residents of Canada (55%) lack the minimum level of health literacy needed to effectively manage their health information needs. About 1.4 million B.C. working age residents (50%) are at this level. B.C. has the fourth highest level of health literacy in Canada.ⁱ

National Health Care Spending

- Health care expenditures account for 10% of Canada's Gross Domestic Product or about \$3820/per Canadian.ⁱⁱ
- Chronic health conditions account for \$80 billion dollars in health care costs in Canada every year.ⁱⁱⁱ

How does health literacy impact health care costs?

- Lower health literacy is associated with poorer health outcomes, worse health status, less health knowledge, and worse disease control.^{iv}
- Better health literacy is associated with a lower prevalence of diabetes^v

Estimated health literacy costs in British Columbia

- Researchers estimate that 3-5% of total health care costs are due to limited health literacy.^{vi} This translates into \$750 million each year in British Columbia.
- A person with lower health literacy might experience up to \$7000/yr in excess personal health care costs compared to a person with adequate health literacy.^{vi}

Improving health literacy can improve outcomes

- Improving health literacy can improve the blood sugar control of people with diabetes^{vii}
- plain language instruction can improve the understanding of use of inhalers and asthma medications for people with asthma^{viii}
- decrease hospitalizations and death for people with chronic heart failure^{ix}
- Increasing health literacy can improve health status and decrease hospital and emergency room use^x

Predictors of health literacy among working-age population in Canada

- The four factors that are most strongly related to health literacy scores among the working age population in Canada are: Literacy practices at home, educational attainment, parents education, and being foreign born, each one of which reflect people's peoples access to opportunities for learning at various stages of their lives.

What can be done?

- A coordinated approach involving immigrant 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.^{xi}
- Training of health workers to provide support to people with lower levels of literacy and health literacy through such means as clear communication, building relationships of trust and awareness of community resources.^{xii}

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ii Statistics Canada (2009) *Canada at a glance*. Available at www.statcan.gc.ca

iii Health Canada (1998). *Economic burden of illness in Canada*. Available at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ebic-femc98/pdf/ebic1998.pdf>

iv Agency Health Care Quality and Research (2004) *Literacy and health outcomes*. Available at <http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcsyms/litsum.htm>

v Canadian Council on Learning (2008) *Health literacy in Canada: A healthy understanding*. Available at <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/HealthLiteracy/HealthLiteracyReportFeb2008E.pdf>

vi Eichler K et al. (2009) *The costs of limited health literacy: a systematic review*. *Inter J Publ Health* 54:313-324

vii Schillinger D et al (2003) *Closing the loop: physician communication with patients who have low health literacy*. *Arch Inter Med* 163:83-90.

viii Paasche-Orlow (2005) *Tailored education may reduce health literacy disparities in asthma treatment*. *Am J Resp Crit Care Med* 172:980-986.

ix DeWalt DA et al. (2006) *A heart failure self-management program for people of all literacy levels: A randomized controlled trial*. *BMC Health Services Res* 6:30.

x 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.

xi 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.

xii *Improving Health Literacy in Communities: Guide to Ideas (2010)* available at www.impactbc.ca