

Health Literacy Briefing Document
Presented to the Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities
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Health literacy is the extent to which individuals can obtain, process, and understand the basic health information and services they need to make appropriate health decisions. For this briefing document, health literacy measures are drawn from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Survey, which uses four literacy levels: below basic, basic, intermediate and proficient.

CRITERION #1: MAGNITUDE

- In 2003, 14% of U.S. adults had below basic health literacy, 22% had basic health literacy, 53% had intermediate health literacy, and 12% had proficient health literacy.

CRITERION #2: ASSOCIATION TO HEALTH OUTCOMES

- Low literacy can affect communication between patients and their health care providers and can inadvertently lead to substandard medical care.
- Increases in health literacy are associated with improvements in self-reported overall health.
- Populations with low levels of health literacy are less likely to obtain screenings for sexually transmitted diseases, cancer screenings, and immunizations, relative to populations with adequate literacy levels.
- Studies have found a significant association between literacy level and knowledge of health issues, such as HIV, diabetes, asthma, and hypertension.
- Low literacy has been shown to be associated with increased smoking rates and decreased rates of breastfeeding.
- Low literacy has been associated with adverse outcomes in diabetes management.
- Some evidence suggests that low literacy may be associated with depression.

CRITERION #3: DISPARITY

- The percentage of adults with below basic health literacy was as follows: 9% for whites, 9% for the multiracial group, 13% for Asians and Pacific Islanders, 24% for blacks, 25% for American Indian and Alaska Natives, and 41% for Hispanics, for an Index of Disparity of 149%.
- Women had higher average health literacy than men; 12% of women had below basic health literacy compared to 16% of men.

The Index of Disparity is the average of the difference in rates between the racial/ethnic group with the "best" rate and all other racial/ethnic groups.

Keppel KG et al., Measuring progress in healthy people 2010. Statistical Notes, no 25. NCHS, 2004.

Sources: (1) Kutner M, Greenberg E, Jin Y, and Paulsen C (2006). The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006-483). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. (2) Berkman ND, DeWalt DA, Pignone MP et al. (2004). Literacy and Health Outcomes. Summary, Evidence Report/Technology Assessment No. 87. AHRQ Publication No. 04-E007-1. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (3) Committee on Health Literacy (2004). Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion. Report Brief. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.