

A Review on Health Literacy

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Article History	Abstract	
Review Article	<i>Health literacy (HL) refers to the ability of individuals to obtain, interpret, evaluate, and use health information effectively. It is a broad and multidimensional construct shaped by demographic, cultural, social, and systemic determinants. Inadequate HL is strongly linked to negative health outcomes, limited utilization of preventive services, higher rates of hospital admissions, and elevated healthcare costs. Research indicates that low levels of HL particularly affect vulnerable groups such as older adults, minority populations, and individuals with limited education or low income. Primary care physicians and other healthcare providers play a vital role in improving HL by integrating educational and supportive strategies into routine care. Furthermore, improving health literacy requires the active participation of many stakeholders, including public agencies, educators, the media, and civil society organizations. This review highlights the importance of prioritizing HL improvement as a public health strategy to advance equity in healthcare access and to diminish health inequalities.</i>	
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Health Literacy

Health literacy (HL) is defined as the capacity of individuals to obtain, interpret, assess, and apply medical information in order to safeguard their health. This multidimensional concept also involves the ability to communicate one's health status, remain informed about illnesses, make sound health-related decisions, and effectively navigate the healthcare system (Nutbeam, 2000). It was defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1998 as "the regimens and social skills necessary for classifying and specifying health information for the improvement of systems and maintenance of good health status". Currently, individuals are required to embrace health-promoting behaviors, remain knowledgeable about the healthcare options accessible to them, take an active role in decisions concerning their health, and maintain awareness of their duties as well as their rights. Having a high level of HL is effective in developing competencies such as using medications correctly, acting in accordance with doctor's instructions, and analyzing treatment methods effectively. Health literacy has become increasingly important due to factors such as the growing importance of preventive health services, increased interest in health

services among individuals, and rising health care costs (Baur, 2010). Due to these factors, studies to determine health literacy levels have gained importance. A comprehensive study was conducted in 8 European countries with the participation of more than 8 thousand people. When the categories of impaired and problematic were taken together, 29% of the respondents from the Netherlands and 62% of the respondents from Bulgaria were in this group (HLS-EU Consortium, 2012). Research carried out in the United States in 2024 revealed that more than half of the participants (52%) demonstrated limited or insufficient levels of HL. Furthermore, ethnicity, marital status, and education level were identified as influencing factors on HL (Tutu et al., 2025).

Insufficient Health Literacy

High levels of HL among individuals enable the sharing of responsibilities between healthcare providers and patients receiving healthcare services and ensure that both parties achieve accurate results in their communication. Individuals with insufficient health literacy have difficulty understanding test results, do not fully comprehend

medication instructions, and are unable to participate adequately in the treatment process. These individuals frequently visit different healthcare institutions for the same health problem, do not benefit sufficiently from preventive healthcare services, and contribute to increased healthcare expenditures (WHO, 2018). According to a systematic review, low health literacy contributes to an additional burden of approximately 3–5% on total annual healthcare expenditures (Eichler et al., 2009). Unhealthy eating habits, tobacco use, and a sedentary lifestyle are more common among individuals with low HL (Kann et al., 2007). A study has determined that mortality risk increases in elderly populations with poor health literacy (Baker et al., 2008). It has been observed that individuals with insufficient HL levels seek medical care late, have lower rates of utilization of preventive health services, and have higher rates of hospitalization compared to other individuals (Zarocostas, 2020). Moreover, studies indicate that people possessing

sufficient health literacy are more successful in reading and comprehending medication leaflets (Bilican & Demirag, 2025).

Individuals should access healthcare services according to their needs. Elderly people, minorities, those with low education, and those with low incomes face inequalities in accessing healthcare services. Findings from the HLS–EU Consortium (2012) reveal that inadequate HL is more prevalent among people with lower educational attainment, low income, minority groups, recently migrated populations, those with poor or long-term health issues, and elderly individuals.

Health Literacy Levels

According to Nutbeam's classification, which is most widely used in the literature, three levels of HL are shown in Table 1 (Nutbeam, 2000).

Table 1. HL Levels

Functional Literacy	These are basic literacy skills necessary for individuals to understand basic information about health services and their health status. They provide individuals with accurate information about health risks and show them how to use the health system.
Interactive HL	It involves integrating higher-order cognitive abilities with social competencies. Moreover, it requires interpreting information from diverse communication channels and applying this knowledge to new contexts.
Critical HL	It is the ability to analyze the social, economic, and political dimensions of health. Individuals can be decision-makers regarding their health and can play an active role in communicating with health professionals.

Influencing Factors

In order to understand the term HL, it is necessary to know the factors that affect HL levels and the effects of these factors. HL is influenced by numerous variables, including an individual's reading and writing skills, age, gender, living conditions, marital status, health-related experiences, media usage habits, personal health status, and socioeconomic status. Additionally, systemic factors such as access to healthcare services, the structural characteristics of the healthcare system, the complexity of the information provided, and the communication skills of healthcare professionals also play a decisive role in HL (Gözlü, 2020, Levin-Zamir et al., 2016). Paasche-Orlow and Wolf's framework highlights that HL is shaped by various influences, including social aspects like income and cultural background, demographic variables such as age, education, and ethnicity, as well as physical and cognitive capacities, for instance memory and vision (Orlow & Wolf, 2007).

Advances in healthcare have also increased the responsibility of individuals for their own health. Another factor affecting the use and effectiveness of healthcare services is health responsibility. There is a strong connection between health responsibility and health promotion. Health responsibility, defined as an individual's ability to demonstrate protective and health-promoting behaviors and behavioral changes related to their own health, impacts the protection and maintenance of health (Avcı, 2016). Individuals' disease experiences are also factors affecting health literacy. Chronic disease management is a process that involves patients collaborating with the healthcare system and healthcare providers and developing various self-care skills. It is critical for patients to actively and effectively communicate and participate in the treatment process in order to achieve positive results in disease management (Avcı & Özkan, 2019, Wallace, 2010).

The Role of Healthcare Professionals

The most important factor in achieving success in healthcare is strong two-way communication between patients and healthcare professionals, along with a patient-centered approach. The quality of communication in the patient interview has been shown to be directly related to health outcomes. Providing information appropriate to the patient's needs and ensuring active participation in the decision-making process significantly increases patient satisfaction. Research from Germany indicated that approaches focusing on patient-centered communication combined with shared decision-making led to nearly a fourfold improvement in patient satisfaction (Altin & Stock, 2016). Healthcare professionals need to communicate in accordance with the patient's level of HL. However, awareness of healthcare professionals in recognizing patients with limited HL level was found to be low. Therefore, it is of great importance to adopt effective communication techniques and to train healthcare professionals in this regard (Kwan et al., 2006). The use of simple and understandable language instead of medical terms, and the use of visual materials contribute to individuals understanding health information more easily. In addition, individuals should also take individual responsibility to use health systems more effectively. They should discuss health issues that they have difficulty in understanding with healthcare professionals and learn more about treatment processes (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2013).

Development Approaches

Improving HL plays a strategic role in improving health indicators at the individual and societal levels. Studies demonstrate that higher levels of education are associated with improved HL. Therefore, it is of great importance to educate individuals, especially from an early age, about HL (Balçık et al., 2014).

Family physicians are essential contributors to enhancing the overall health literacy of communities. The public must be properly informed about the duties and authorities of family physicians. Similarly, the importance of preventive health services should be emphasized, and individuals should be encouraged to undergo regular health screenings (Cifuentes et al., 2015).

With the rise in the rate of searching for health information on the internet, individuals frequently encounter content that has not been proven to be accurate. Individuals should be directed to reliable and official health platforms based on scientific evidence. Furthermore, the responsibility for improving the health literacy of society does not lie solely with healthcare professionals and healthcare institutions. Public institutions, the media, educators, and non-

governmental organizations should also play an active role in this process (Kickbusch, 2011). This can help individuals develop various life skills that will equip them with accurate knowledge, positive attitudes, and behaviors. Placing emphasis on health literacy during this process can enhance the population's overall literacy levels, facilitating individuals' ability to comprehend and utilize healthcare services. As a result, quality of life improves while health disparities are reduced (Kickbusch et al., 2013).

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