



What is health literacy?

Why is it important?

The main points

Health literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information about health issues such as drugs and alcohol, disease prevention and treatment, safety and accident prevention, first aid, emergencies and staying healthy. Most people in Tasmania are not health literate.

The **health literacy environment** is the way health services are provided and the variables that make it easier or harder for people to access, understand, and use health information and services.

Health literacy is about safety, quality, efficiency, effectiveness, equity, informed consent, client rights and access to services.

For healthy people and efficient, effective health services, we need to:

- improve health literacy levels across the population
- improve the health literacy environments within our health services, to match the health literacy levels of the people who use our services.

How health literate are Tasmanians?

Nearly two in three people aged 15–74 years in Tasmania (63 per cent in Tasmania and 59 per cent nationally) do not have “adequate health literacy to meet the demands of every day modern life”.ⁱ

Even nearly one in three adults with a Bachelor degree (at least 15 years of full-time education) do not have adequate health literacy.



Why is health literacy important?

Poor health literacy means most people do not fully understand information provided about health and wellbeing across areas like disease prevention and treatment, medication use, safe drug and alcohol use, safety, first aid and staying healthy.

Health literacy is important because *knowledge is power*. Health literacy has a big impact on decisions people make that affect their health and wellbeing. It has been described as a better *predictor* of health than education, socio-economic status, employment, racial background or gender.ⁱⁱ Health literacy also has a big impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of health and human services.

Poor health literacy makes it harder for people to:

- access health services – know who to see and when, fill in forms and share important information with health professionals
- care for themselves and manage chronic illnesses effectively.

Those with poor health literacy:

- have less knowledge about illnesses and injuries, treatment options, what causes ill-health and the importance of healthy lifestyles
- find it harder to understand and remember health information
- are more dependent on healthcare providers, hospital and emergency services but less likely to use programs to keep them healthy or diagnose problems early, like cancer screening, childhood health assessments and routine immunisations.

What can we do about health literacy?

We can lessen the impact of low health literacy by making sure how we communicate and provide services matches the health literacy of the people who use our services. This includes:

- providing appropriate information to the needs of each person and checking it is understood
- using language services appropriately
- providing information in a variety of formats including written and spoken information, pictures, diagrams, models, audio-video demonstrations and group discussions
- providing effective instructional and directional signs
- considering the physical design and layout of services
- having excellent telephone and reception service standards
- helping people to complete forms
- providing staff orientation and ongoing training.

The health sector can also work with other sectors – especially education and adult literacy– to improve the health literacy of Tasmanians.

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Health Literacy in Australia 2006*, ABS cat. no. 4233.0, ABS, Canberra, 2006,

ⁱⁱ B Weiss, 'Epidemiology of health literacy' in Schwartzber J et.al. (Eds) *Understanding health literacy: implications for medicine and public health*. American Medical Association, AMA Press, 2005, pp. 17–40.