



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2019; 5(5): 335-340
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 11-04-2019
Accepted: 15-05-2019

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The concept of health literacy: Understanding its importance

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Abstract

Health literacy, comprising the ability to access, understand, evaluate, and apply health information, is fundamental for making informed decisions about one's health. It encompasses not only the ability to comprehend health information but also the skills to communicate this information effectively for other's health. It is increasingly recognized as an essential concept for individuals and societies worldwide. This research paper explores the profound significance of health literacy in promoting personal well-being, health equity, preventative healthcare behavior, and societal progress. This paper address the role of health literacy in empowering individuals to navigate complex healthcare systems, communicate effectively with healthcare providers, and engage in self-care practices. It highlights the impact of low health literacy on health disparities, emphasizing the disproportionate burden borne by vulnerable populations. This paper highlights how individuals with higher health literacy are more likely to adopt preventive health behaviors, seek timely healthcare services, and adhere to medical recommendations, ultimately leading to improved health outcomes and reduced healthcare costs. Furthermore, this paper discusses the role of health literacy in promoting civic engagement, advocating for health-related policies, and fostering a culture of health within communities. In conclusion, this research paper underscores the critical importance of advancing health literacy as a cornerstone of individual and societal well-being. By investing in health literacy initiatives, policymakers, healthcare providers, and community leaders can mitigate health disparities, enhance preventative healthcare efforts, and pave the way for a healthier and more equitable future for all.

Keywords: Health literacy, preventative health behaviors, health equity, well-being

1. Introduction

United States Surgeon General Richard Carmona emphasizes the critical importance of health literacy, stating that it is 'the currency of success' for initiatives in public health preparedness, healthcare disparities, and promoting prevention.

Health literacy is an indispensable asset in today's world, encompassing the ability of individuals to access, comprehend, and utilize health information effectively for the betterment of their own health, as well as that of their families and communities. In recent years, the understanding of health literacy has evolved beyond mere literacy skills to include a broader range of competencies necessary for navigating complex healthcare systems and making informed health-related decisions. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines health literacy as "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions ^[1]. While various definitions exist, they all converge on the notion that health literacy is more than just the ability to read pamphlets or understand medical jargon; it involves critical thinking, communication skills, and the capacity to apply health knowledge in real-life situations (World Health Organizations).

In today's healthcare system, patients face a significant literacy burden as they navigate various healthcare settings and interact with a wide array of health-related information. From appointments at doctors' offices to visits to clinics and hospitals, patients encounter a multitude of documents, including treatment instructions, educational materials, prescriptions, bills, and insurance forms. Moreover, patients are increasingly required to play a more active role in managing their own healthcare and chronic conditions.

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This responsibility involves not only understanding medical information but also making informed decisions about treatments, adhering to prescribed therapies, and coordinating care between healthcare providers. As healthcare systems evolve and place greater emphasis on patient-centered care, the ability to effectively navigate the complexities of healthcare becomes essential for individuals to maintain their health and well-being.

Andrus and Roth (2002) ^[2] highlighted the adverse effects associated with limited health literacy in their research paper on "Health literacy: A review". These effects include poorer health status, inadequate knowledge about medical care and conditions, difficulties in understanding medical information, lower utilization of preventive services, poorer self-reported health, reduced adherence to medical recommendations, higher rates of hospitalization, and increased healthcare costs. This is the reason why the United Nations ECOSOC Ministerial Declaration of 2009 underscored the pivotal role of health literacy in achieving significant health outcomes and called for the development of action plans to promote health literacy worldwide. This acknowledgment reflects the understanding that knowledge and understanding are powerful tools in health promotion. Empowering citizens through improved health literacy is essential for achieving the ambitious targets set forth in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. While health literacy is not explicitly targeted within the SDGs, its impact reverberates across multiple goals, from promoting good health and well-being (SDG 3) to advancing gender equality (SDG 5) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). By enhancing health literacy through education, communication, and policy interventions, nations can address a wide array of health challenges while advancing progress towards the broader goals of sustainable development.

Health literacy plays a crucial role in the prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). With NCDs such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases becoming a global epidemic, enhancing health literacy becomes imperative to promote early detection, encourage preventive measures, and mitigate the burden of these diseases on individuals and societies worldwide. WHO outlines the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013- 2020. This plan outlines strategic objectives and interventions aimed at addressing the rising burden of NCDs, emphasizing the importance of health literacy in implementing effective prevention and control measures at both national and global levels.

Communities with enhanced health literacy are better equipped to address the social, economic, and environmental determinants of health, thereby promoting overall well-being and societal progress. This recognition has prompted calls for a shift in perspective, emphasizing that health literacy should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of individuals but should also be supported by clear, accurate, and accessible health information provided by governments and healthcare systems. This research paper aims to explore the various dimensions of health literacy, highlighting its significance for individual well-being, health equity, and societal advancement. The researchers intend to highlight the pivotal role of health literacy in influencing personal health outcomes and mobilizing

collaborative efforts toward fostering a healthier, more equitable and prosperous community.

2. Conceptualising Health Literacy

Berkman *et al.*, 2004 ^[3] state that the concept and definition of health literacy is evolving and hasn't been uniformly used.

The concept of literacy has evolved significantly over time, moving beyond traditional notions of simply being able to read and write. Literacy, in its essence, refers to the ability to read, write, and comprehend information. It encompasses the fundamental skills needed to navigate written language, understand symbols and numbers, and interpret textual content. A literate individual can engage with various forms of written communication, from simple instructions to complex texts, and derive meaning from them. Building upon this foundation, health literacy extends the concept to the realm of healthcare and well-being. It involves not only the ability to read medical information but also to comprehend and apply it in making informed decisions about one's health. Health literacy encompasses skills such as understanding medical terminology, interpreting health-related documents (like prescription labels or medical forms), critically evaluating health information, and effectively communicating with healthcare providers. It empowers individuals to actively participate in healthcare decision-making, adhere to treatment plans, and engage in behaviors that promote their overall well-being.

While educational attainment was once seen as a reliable indicator of an individual's skill level, it has become apparent that this is not always the case. Individuals with similar levels of education can vary widely in their reading and mathematical abilities, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of literacy (Berkman *et al.*, 2004) ^[3]. Even individuals with high literacy and education levels may struggle to comprehend information from clinicians, as medical professionals often use terminology and discuss physiological concepts that are unfamiliar to those without medical training. Health literacy encompasses more than just the ability to read and understand health-related information. While early definitions focused on basic reading and numeracy skills in a healthcare context, contemporary understandings emphasize broader goals. According to Ratzan (2001) ^[4], health literacy involves the capacity to obtain, process, and understand health information, transcending mere literacy skills. Subsequent definitions have expanded this concept to include additional abilities such as effective communication, technological proficiency, motivation, cognitive capacity, and social skills (Nutbeam, 2006) ^[5]. Thus, health literacy represents a holistic approach to understand the many dimensions of healthcare, self care and promoting well-being.

For example, when a text discusses the risks and benefits of a medical procedure or the likelihood of a child being affected by a genetic disorder, it assumes that the reader possesses a fundamental understanding of the concept of risk. For instance, imagine reading a pamphlet about the potential side effects of a new medication. To comprehend the information effectively, you need to grasp the concept of risk, including understanding terms like "side effects," "probability," and "likelihood." Without this foundational knowledge, it becomes challenging to make informed decisions about health. However, health literacy transcends

merely reading pamphlets. Beyond reading, it involves observing one's body, recognizing symptoms, and understanding disease patterns and their progression. Moreover, effective health literacy enables individuals to articulate their concerns to healthcare providers accurately. Miscommunication between doctors and patients persist as a significant challenge in many societies worldwide, particularly in countries like India. These gaps hinder effective healthcare delivery and can lead to misunderstandings, misdiagnoses, and suboptimal treatment outcomes. For example, health literacy lies in understanding the relationship between exercise and stroke prevention. While the benefits of physical activity in maintaining overall health are widely accepted, recognizing its specific role in reducing the risk of high blood pressure, diabetes requires a deeper understanding. Engaging in regular exercise helps maintain healthy blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and weight, all of which are key factors in preventing stroke. By being physically active, individuals actively participate in their own health management, demonstrating a level of health literacy that extends beyond basic awareness.

Similarly, dietary choices play a significant role in maintaining health and preventing chronic conditions like diabetes. Many people understand the importance of consuming a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins for overall health. However, health literacy comes into play when considering the impact of sugar consumption on diabetes and overall health. While sugar is commonly associated with sweets and desserts, its presence in various processed foods and beverages may go unnoticed. Understanding how sugar intake affects blood sugar levels and insulin sensitivity is crucial for individuals managing diabetes or at risk of developing the condition. Health literacy empowers individuals to make informed dietary choices, considering not only taste but also nutritional content and health implications.

Health literacy involves the ability to apply information in practical ways, such as incorporating regular physical activity into one's routine and making mindful dietary choices, active observation of changes in one's body. It also entails recognizing when additional support or information is needed, whether from healthcare providers, community resources, or reliable sources of health information.

3. How Health Literacy impact the Well-being of All

Low health literacy is associated with adverse health outcomes, increased hospitalizations, and poorer management of chronic conditions. Case studies illustrate how individuals with limited health literacy face challenges in understanding medication instructions, interpreting health messages, and accessing appropriate healthcare services, thereby compromising their well-being. Individuals with limited literacy skills tend to experience poorer health outcomes compared to those with higher literacy levels. Various studies conducted in different contexts have consistently demonstrated that even after accounting for sociodemographic factors, limited literacy skills and inadequate comprehension of health concepts (referred to as poor health literacy) correlate with worse health results. This could be attributed to the mentioned deficiencies in health knowledge, along with issues such as medication mistakes, difficulty understanding medical instructions, and a lack of self-empowerment. The following paragraphs illustrate how health literacy yields positive results for

individuals, communities, children, and societies through various examples.

3.1 Health Literacy and Individual Health: At the individual level, health literacy empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their health. When equipped with the knowledge of what to eat and what to avoid, individuals can adopt healthier dietary habits, reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Moreover, understanding the importance of routine check-ups enables individuals to proactively monitor their health status and detect potential issues early on. This proactive approach to healthcare not only improves health outcomes but also reduces healthcare costs associated with preventable illnesses.

Furthermore, health-literate individuals are better prepared to seek medical help promptly when experiencing symptoms or concerns. By recognizing the urgency of seeking medical attention at the earliest signs of illness, they can prevent conditions from worsening and mitigate the risk of complications. Additionally, a strong grasp of health literacy discourages individuals from dismissing medical recommendations or seeking alternative treatments without consulting healthcare professionals. Instead, they value evidence-based practices and adhere to recommended treatment plans, promoting better health outcomes and recovery.

Moreover, health-literate individuals recognize the importance of seeking multiple medical opinions when faced with complex health issues or treatment decisions. By consulting with various healthcare providers, they gain diverse perspectives and insights, enabling them to make more informed choices about their health. This collaborative approach to healthcare fosters trust and confidence in medical decisions, ultimately enhancing individual well-being.

3.2 Health Literacy, Family and Community Well-being:

Beyond the individual, health literacy yields positive outcomes for families and communities by promoting collective well-being and resilience. In families, individuals with high health literacy serve as role models and educators, sharing knowledge and promoting healthy behaviors among family members. Within the family unit, individuals who possess higher health literacy are better equipped to monitor and manage the health of themselves and their loved ones. For instance, a mother who is literate in health matters can accurately read a thermometer, enabling her to detect and address fevers in her children promptly. Additionally, she is more likely to engage in healthier behaviors herself, such as avoiding smoking during pregnancy and prioritizing breastfeeding, which are crucial for the well-being of both mother and child. Moreover, a highly health-literate individual can observe subtle changes in the health status of their family and friends and provide informed advice and support accordingly. For example, if they notice a family member exhibiting symptoms of a particular health condition, they can encourage them to seek medical attention promptly or provide insights into preventive measures and lifestyle modifications.

In the context of Indian traditional healthcare practices, a person with high health literacy can discern the benefits and risks associated with such remedies. While ancient remedies

may offer holistic approaches to health, a health-literate individual can critically evaluate their efficacy and appropriateness for specific health concerns. This ability to navigate between traditional and modern healthcare systems ensures that families make informed decisions about their health, drawing from the best of both worlds.

Furthermore, women, often the primary caregivers in families and communities, stand to benefit significantly from enhanced health literacy. They tend to seek out health information more actively, driven by their roles in nurturing and safeguarding the health of their loved ones. Empowering women with health literacy equips them with the knowledge and skills to make informed choices for themselves and their families, thereby fostering a culture of health and well-being within the community at large. Ultimately, a community comprised of health-literate individuals and families is more resilient, proactive, and better equipped to address health challenges collectively, leading to improved overall health outcomes and quality of life for everyone involved.

The understanding of preventive health measures and access to healthcare resources empower communities to advocate for community health initiatives and support initiatives aimed at improving access to healthcare services. By actively participating in community health programs, they help address health disparities and promote equity in healthcare access and outcomes. Moreover, health-literate communities are better equipped to respond to public health crises and emergencies effectively. With a shared understanding of health information and resources, community members can collaborate with local authorities and healthcare providers to implement timely interventions and mitigate the spread of diseases.

Furthermore, health literacy fosters social cohesion and solidarity within communities, as individuals come together to support each other's health and well-being. By fostering open communication and mutual support networks, communities can address health challenges collectively and build resilience against health threats.

3.2.1 Impact of Parental Health Literacy on Children's Health and Quality of Life

Parental health literacy plays a crucial role in shaping the health outcomes and well-being of their children. When parents possess adequate health literacy skills, they are better equipped to make informed decisions regarding their children's healthcare needs, preventive measures, and treatment options. For instance, parents with higher health literacy are more likely to recognize signs of illness in their children, seek timely medical attention, and adhere to recommended healthcare practices such as vaccinations and preventive screenings. By actively engaging in their children's healthcare, these parents contribute to early disease detection, effective management of chronic conditions, and overall better health outcomes for their children. Parents who understand the importance of nutrition, physical activity, and hygiene are more likely to instill healthy habits in their children from a young age. They can provide guidance on nutritious eating patterns, encourage regular physical activity, and promote preventive measures to reduce the risk of illness and injury. As a result, children raised in environments where health literacy is valued are more likely to adopt healthy behaviors, maintain

a healthy weight, and experience fewer health-related issues throughout their lives.

DeWalt and Hink (2009) ^[6] found that children from households with lower literacy levels tended to exhibit poorer health behaviors, while parents with lower literacy levels demonstrated less health knowledge and engaged in behaviors less conducive to their children's health compared to parents with higher literacy levels. Children whose parents had lower literacy levels often experienced worse health outcomes, although the association between literacy and the utilization of healthcare services yielded mixed findings. Interventions aimed at enhancing written materials have shown promise in increasing health knowledge, while combining well-crafted written materials with brief counseling sessions has been associated with improvements in behaviors such as adherence to health recommendations. Furthermore, parental health literacy has profound implications for children's educational attainment and overall quality of life. Parents who are knowledgeable about the link between health and academic success are better equipped to support their children's cognitive development, attendance at school, and ability to concentrate in class. Additionally, they can advocate for access to appropriate healthcare services and resources within the community, ensuring that their children receive the necessary support for optimal growth and development.

3.3 Health Literacy and Non-Communicable Disease

Health literacy helps in mitigating the epidemic of noncommunicable diseases. Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), commonly referred to as chronic diseases, pose a significant global health challenge due to their prolonged duration. These result from a complex interplay of genetic, physiological, environmental, and behavioral factors. Despite affecting individuals worldwide, NCDs disproportionately impact populations in low- and middle-income countries, where the majority of NCD-related deaths occur. Factors such as rapid urbanization, globalization of unhealthy lifestyles, and population aging contribute to the escalating burden of NCDs on a global scale.

Central to addressing the NCD epidemic is understanding and addressing the modifiable behavioral risk factors associated with these diseases. Health literacy plays a crucial role in this endeavor by empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their health and adopt healthier lifestyles. By understanding the detrimental effects of behaviors such as tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and harmful alcohol consumption, individuals can take proactive steps to mitigate their risk of developing NCDs. Moreover, health literacy enables individuals to recognize the importance of early detection, screening, and appropriate treatment for NCDs, thereby reducing their impact and preventing premature deaths.

On a global scale, the impact of NCDs is staggering, with these diseases responsible for the majority of deaths worldwide. Cardiovascular diseases, followed by cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes, account for a significant proportion of NCD-related mortality. However, through concerted efforts to promote health literacy and empower individuals to adopt healthier behaviors, the burden of NCDs can be mitigated. By providing individuals with the knowledge and skills to make informed choices about their health, health literacy serves as a powerful tool in the fight

against NCDs, ultimately contributing to improved health outcomes and enhanced quality of life for individuals, families, and communities worldwide. High health literacy empowers individuals to engage in preventive health behaviors, such as regular screenings, vaccinations, and healthy lifestyle choices. Case studies demonstrate how targeted health literacy interventions can promote awareness, motivate behavior change, and improve overall health outcomes in diverse communities.

3.4 Health literacy and Mental Health

Mental health literacy represents a critical dimension of public health awareness, yet it remains relatively underexplored compared to physical health literacy. While individuals may possess a wealth of knowledge about managing physical ailments, their understanding of mental health conditions and appropriate interventions often lags behind. Research indicates significant gaps in the public's knowledge regarding the prevention, recognition, and treatment of mental disorders (Jorm 2012) [7]. For instance, surveys conducted across various countries reveal deficiencies in recognizing early signs of mental health issues, accessing appropriate support systems, and implementing effective self-care strategies. This disparity underscores the pressing need to elevate mental health literacy as a priority in public health discourse and policymaking.

Efforts to enhance mental health literacy offer promising avenues for promoting well-being and reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. Community-based campaigns, educational interventions, and training programs have demonstrated effectiveness in improving public knowledge and attitudes toward mental health. By equipping individuals with the skills to recognize symptoms, access resources, and provide support to others, these initiatives foster a culture of empathy and understanding. Moreover, investing in mental health literacy initiatives aligns with broader public health objectives of early intervention, prevention, and equitable access to care. As societies grapple with the growing burden of mental health disorders, prioritizing mental health literacy initiatives can empower communities to address these challenges proactively and compassionately.

It is imperative to recognize the interconnectedness of physical and mental well-being. While conventional health literacy initiatives have traditionally focused on physical ailments, mental health literacy emerges as a crucial component of overall health promotion. By integrating mental health education into existing health literacy frameworks, policymakers and healthcare professionals can foster a more holistic understanding of health and empower individuals to make informed decisions about their well-being. Moreover, addressing disparities in mental health literacy can contribute to reducing the burden of mental illness, improving treatment outcomes, and enhancing the quality of life for individuals and communities alike.

3.5 Health Literacy and Interpersonal Communication

Effective interpersonal communication between doctors and patients is crucial for ensuring accurate diagnosis, appropriate treatment, and overall patient satisfaction. However, deficits in interpersonal communication can lead to misunderstandings, mismanagement of medications, and dissatisfaction with healthcare experiences. For example, if

a patient is unable to effectively communicate their symptoms or concerns to their doctor due to language barriers or discomfort discussing sensitive topics, it can result in an inaccurate diagnosis or inappropriate treatment plan. Patients struggle to articulate their symptoms effectively, either because they have numerous symptoms to describe or because they inadvertently omit crucial information that could aid in diagnosis and treatment. In such instances, patients may find themselves struggling to convey their concerns cohesively to their healthcare providers. Patients can improve their ability to communicate effectively with doctors by practicing how to articulate their symptoms before their appointments. By rehearsing and framing their message clearly, patients can ensure that they convey all relevant information to their healthcare providers in a concise and understandable manner. This proactive approach empowers patients to advocate for their own health and facilitates more productive interactions with their doctors. One another way to improve interpersonal communication in healthcare settings is by employing clear and simple language that patients can easily understand. By avoiding medical jargon and explaining concepts in plain terms, doctors can ensure that patients fully grasp the information being conveyed. Additionally, using visual aids such as diagrams or illustrations can enhance patient understanding and retention of important medical information, especially for individuals with limited health literacy.

Furthermore, creating a supportive and shame-free environment encourages patients to ask questions and seek clarification when needed. By fostering open dialogue and actively listening to patients' concerns, doctors can address any misunderstandings and ensure that patients feel empowered to actively participate in their healthcare decisions. For instance, employing the teach-back technique, where patients are asked to repeat back instructions in their own words, can help confirm their understanding and identify areas where further explanation may be needed. Implementing strategies such as slowing down the pace of communication, limiting the amount of information provided at once, and repeating key points can also enhance patient comprehension and retention of medical information. By taking the time to ensure that patients fully understand their diagnosis, treatment options, and instructions for self-care, healthcare providers can mitigate the risk of miscommunication and improve health outcomes.

Effective interpersonal communication is essential for promoting health literacy and ensuring positive healthcare experiences. By employing strategies such as using plain language, utilizing visual aids, and creating a supportive environment, doctors can facilitate meaningful dialogue with patients and empower them to take an active role in managing their health.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper underscores the critical importance of advancing health literacy as a means to promote individual well-being, reduce health disparities, and foster societal progress. Exploring the benefits of higher health literacy reveals a range of advantages that positively impact both individuals and communities. Firstly, individuals with strong health literacy are adept at making informed decisions about their well-being. They possess the critical

thinking skills necessary to evaluate health information, understand potential risks, and choose appropriate courses of action. This capability extends to effective communication with healthcare providers, where health-literate individuals can articulate their concerns, ask pertinent questions, and actively engage in discussions about their health conditions. This improved communication fosters better diagnosis, treatment adherence, and overall health outcomes. Moreover, health literacy empowers individuals to navigate the complexities of the healthcare system with confidence. From understanding insurance policies to scheduling appointments and completing medical paperwork, individuals with higher health literacy can access the services they need, follow care plans, and seek timely medical attention. Furthermore, high health literacy encourages preventive health practices, such as regular screenings, vaccinations, and lifestyle modifications – diet selection and exercise adoption, thereby reducing the risk of diseases and promoting overall well-being. The inclusion of mental health education into existing health literacy frameworks, policymakers and healthcare professionals can foster a more holistic understanding of health and empower individuals to make informed decisions about their well-being. Beyond individual benefits, improved health literacy contributes to the reduction of health disparities within communities. By ensuring that everyone can understand health information equally, regardless of socioeconomic status or educational background, health literacy promotes a fairer and more equitable healthcare system. Additionally, health-literate individuals are empowered to self-manage chronic conditions effectively, monitoring symptoms, adhering to treatment plans, and maintaining a high quality of life.

By investing in comprehensive health literacy initiatives, policymakers, healthcare providers, and community leaders can empower individuals to make informed decisions, and lead healthier lives.

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