

What is health literacy?

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, health literacy is having the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. Health literacy is dependent on individual and systemic factors:

- Communication skills of lay persons and professionals
- Lay and professional knowledge of health topics
- Culture
- Demands of the healthcare and public health systems
- Demands of the situation/context

Health literacy affects people's ability to:

- Navigate the healthcare system, including filling out complex forms and locating providers and services
- Share personal information, such as health history, with providers
- Engage in self-care and chronic-disease management
- Understand mathematical concepts such as probability and risk

Health literacy also includes numeracy skills. For example, calculating cholesterol and blood sugar levels, measuring medications, and understanding nutrition labels all require math skills. Choosing between health plans or comparing prescription drug coverage requires calculating premiums, copays, and deductibles.

In addition to basic literacy skills, health literacy requires knowledge of health topics. People with limited health literacy often lack knowledge or have misinformation about their bodies or about the nature and causes of disease. Without this knowledge, they may not understand the relationship between lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise and various health outcomes.

So why is it important?

Health information can overwhelm even persons with advanced literacy skills. Medical science progresses rapidly. What people may have learned about health or biology during their school years often becomes outdated or forgotten, or it is incomplete. Moreover, health information provided in a stressful or unfamiliar situation is unlikely to be retained. Additionally, since culture and environment are great impacts on our lives, we must understand these factors when considering health literacy.

We want our Larimer County Citizens to experience a feeling of understanding about health; moreover, we want them to be an active participant in health and lifestyle. We also want health professionals to interact with patients and clients in a way that makes health and lifestyle understandable and easier to manage or navigate. In the coming months, we will discuss health literacy both to better understand its role in our community, as well as to explain ways in which we can apply it. Stay tuned!