

# Health Literacy:

## What is it and why is it important to me?



UHN

Information for patients and their families

### This booklet explains:

- Why health literacy is important to your health and well being
- What you can do to improve your health literacy skills

### What is health literacy?

Health Literacy describes the skills needed to get, understand and use information to make good decisions about health (*from the Report of the Expert Panel on Health Literacy, 2008*).

When you have good health literacy skills you can:

- Make healthy lifestyle choices like choosing to exercise and eat right.
- Read health information, understand it and make good decisions using this information.
- Communicate your needs to your doctor or health care provider.
- Listen to and understand instructions about your health and your treatments.
- Understand how to find medical care and navigate the health system, by finding services you need, in your community.
- Choose behaviours that may reduce your risk of getting sick.
- Understand your health and health conditions.

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## Why is health literacy important?

Studies show that 60% of Canadian adults do not have the necessary skills to manage their health and make health decisions on their own. (Canadian Council on Learning)

Health literacy skills are directly related to your over-all health. The better your skills are, the better you will be able to manage your health and health information. **This means that people with good health literacy skills have better health!** Developing these skills will help to ensure you receive the best possible care.

Health information can seem very complicated, which can make it hard to ask for the care you need, understand your health conditions, or be able to talk about your health.

Without good health literacy skills:

- harmful decisions could be made
- health conditions may be overlooked
- instructions may not be followed or
- important questions may go unanswered.

Take control of your personal health!

## What can you do to improve your health literacy skills?

- **Read every day!**  
Reading everyday improves health literacy skills. This includes reading newspapers, books, web pages and magazines.
- **Get involved!**  
Ask questions. Tell your health care provider what you prefer about your health. Ask your health care provider to explain things in a way that you understand. This could include drawing diagrams, using clear language or giving you information to take home.
- **Visit the Patient & Family Library.**  
Find reliable and up to date health information at the Patient & Family libraries located at Princess Margaret Hospital, Toronto General Hospital and Toronto Western Hospital.

## What can you do to be involved in your care?

1. Tell your health care provider about any past illnesses or any new symptoms you are having.
2. Tell a member of your health care team if you have ever had an allergic reaction or bad reaction to any food or medicine.

3. Write down your questions before you see your health care provider so that you remember everything. Ask them to explain in “plain language.”
4. Bring all of your medicines, including vitamins and any over the counter or herbal remedies, when you go to the hospital or when you see your health care provider.
5. Take a family member or friend along to the appointment to help you remember what your health care provider says.
6. Make sure you know what to do when you go home from the hospital or from your doctor’s office.
7. Ask questions about anything you are unclear about. Your health care providers are there to support you and give you answers.

Knowledge is the best medicine!

**For more information on health literacy visit:**

California Health Literacy Initiative  
[www.cahealthliteracy.org](http://www.cahealthliteracy.org)

Canadian Public Health Association  
<http://www.cpha.ca/>

Canadian Council on Learning  
<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/>