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# Why it is important to assess health literacy

Assessment of the health literacy strengths and limitations allows interventions to be strategically designed and delivered to address health inequities and improve health outcomes.

Health literacy is a potentially modifiable contributor to health. Undertaking an assessment of health literacy strengths and limitations provides information about:

1. people's ability to engage with health information and services; and
2. the ability of health and community services to respond to the needs of the local community.

An understanding of these factors allows organisations, researchers, policy makers and practitioners to strategically develop and implement interventions.

Actions to address health literacy and the responsiveness of services will improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities by reducing the gap between community needs and the support that is provided. These actions must be strategically targeted to the particular health literacy strengths and difficulties of local communities in order to efficiently achieve the desired outcomes.

Studies have shown correlations between low health literacy\* and:

- increased hospital admissions and readmissions<sup>1</sup>
- poorer medication adherence and increased adverse medication events<sup>2</sup>
- less participation in prevention activities<sup>3,4</sup>
- higher prevalence of health risk factors<sup>5,6</sup>
- poorer self-management of chronic diseases and poorer disease outcomes<sup>7</sup>
- less effective communication with healthcare professionals<sup>8</sup>
- increased healthcare costs<sup>9</sup>
- lower functional status<sup>10</sup> and
- poorer overall health status<sup>11,12</sup> including increased mortality.<sup>13</sup>

*\*Note: Measures of health literacy used in many of these studies focused on a limited range of health-related literacy and numeracy skills.*

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