



# Literacy: A determinant of health

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**Many factors contribute to our** health as a community, or more accurately, as a population. Population or

public health identifies these as determinants of health. Factors like income, education and housing are all examples of these determinants of health; they are correlated to how healthy we are as a group.

Literacy is another key determinant of health.

But how can the ability to read and write connect to one's physical and mental health? The answer has many elements, but two general themes stand out.

The first is the correlation between literacy and poverty. The second is that low literacy skills present genuine barriers to accessing health information and services, and further, to making informed decisions about lifestyle.

On the poverty side, low literacy affects a person's ability to land a decent job and earn adequate income. Without a decent income, a family's nutritional needs can be compromised. In turn, this can lead to repercussions like malnutrition which affects mental and physical health; life expectancy from being more prone to accidents. People in this group are more likely to work and live in unsafe or dangerous environments. There is also an increased susceptibility to a number of diseases, from diabetes to cancer and cardiovascular disease. In contrast, the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, we find that the higher the income, the better the health.

Literacy is also critical to getting access to information and services. Those with lower literacy skills will have difficulty reading and understanding health

information and prescription instructions. (Barriers also exist for those whose first language is not English or French.)

Low literacy may also contribute to being unaware of many services that are available. Worse, even if people are aware of services, they often feel powerless and intimidated in relation to health professionals and institutions. As a result, less literate people often wait until health problems reach a crisis state to seek medical help.

Because we are aware of these challenges, we can address many of them to help people get the healthcare and information they should have. Resources and help are available in our communities. For example, CALL (Community Access to Literacy & Learning) is a literacy program that is both free and confidential. The service is available in both Powell River and Sechelt, but every community will have support and resources for improving literacy.

Pursued together, better literacy and better health are both more likely to be successful. Literacy programs help build a channel to reach those most at risk. Health information, in turn, provides a useful learning tool for literacy programs. As this is Literacy Week in BC, why not take a moment to visit the [provincial website](#). It offers a wealth of information and resources. If you know someone who could use this information, maybe have them join you as you visit.

Everyone benefits when literacy is improved for all.

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