Health Literacy

NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire

Of working age adults in England:

Average reading age is **11-14 years old** [1]

42% are unable to understand or make use of everyday health information (health literacy) [2]

This rises to **61%** when numeracy skills are also required for comprehension (health numeracy) [2]

43% of adults struggle to understand instructions to calculate a childhood paracetamol dose. [2]

Prevalence of low health literacy and numeracy by local authority [4]

	Low Health Literacy (%)	Low Health Literacy & Numeracy (%)
England	38.88	58.30
Herefordshire	37	56.78
Worcestershire	35.92	55.7

Long-term health conditions (LTCs)

- Low health literacy is more common among people with LTCs including diabetes [10], heart disease [11], stroke [7], kidney disease [12], and musculoskeletal disease [13] [14]
- People with low health literacy less likely to successfully manage LTCs [3]

The strongest correlation to ill health – stronger than education level, deprivation, age or ethnicity – is health literacy [6]

Low health literacy is more likely in populations that experience health inequalities, including:

- Disabled people [8] Only 30% of GP surgeries have information that is accessible to people with learning disabilities [9]
- Older adults (65+) over four times more likely to have limited functional health literacy than the general population. 48% of people over 50 years with inadequate health literacy participated in cancer screening, compared with 58% of those with adequate health literacy [15]
- Disadvantaged socioeconomic groups such as people with low basic education [17] and lower income adults [24].

Why is Health Literacy Important?

People with inadequate health literacy skills are more likely to experience poor health outcomes:

More likely to have worse health-limiting conditions and to report deteriorating self-rated health [25]

More likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours; smoking, drinking alcohol, sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy diet [7, 19 - 22]

Less likely to access prevention services (e.g. immunisation and cancer screening programmes) [23]

1.5 - 3 x more likely to experience increased hospitalisation or death [18]

Lower Activation

In people with a chronic disease, those with low health literacy know significant less about their disease than those with adequate literacy" [5]

For example, In a diabetes study 94% with adequate health functional health literacy knew the systems of hypoglycaemia compared with 50% of those with inadequate literacy. [3]

Financial Cost

Economic cost of poor health literacy in England crudely estimated **between £2.95 billion and £4.92 billion per year** [16]

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