

## What is health literacy and why is it an important priority on the EU agenda?

Did you know that health literacy is an essential component of effective healthcare? Health literacy goes beyond the ability to read and write; it encompasses the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services necessary to make informed health decisions. At its core, health literacy means being proficient in managing one's own health, including general healthcare, disease prevention, and health promotion. It involves accessing, understanding, evaluating, and utilising health information from various sources such as healthcare professionals, medical institutions, patient organisations, and medical products.

However, health literacy extends beyond individual capabilities. Enhancing societal levels of health literacy involves addressing barriers created by healthcare systems and policies. When health documents and processes are designed with an understanding of the diverse knowledge and backgrounds of all stakeholders, societal health literacy improves. Healthcare professionals should have adequate skills and be effective communicators, recognising the need to support patients and caregivers in navigating the complex health information landscape.

Almost a decade ago, the [European Health Literacy Survey \(HLS-EU\)](#) was conducted in eight countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain. It was the first study to provide EU-level population data on health literacy, allowing comparisons between Member States and clearly indicating that health literacy should remain an **important priority on the EU agenda**.

As highlighted in the consensus paper [‘Making health literacy a priority in EU policy’](#), improving health literacy across the EU is crucial for several reasons. Enhancing health literacy empowers individuals to actively engage in **health care decisions**, fosters social cohesion by addressing inequalities, and equips citizens to navigate complex health technologies, thereby ensuring equitable access to healthcare.

## Encouraging Health Literacy Through Health Management

To address the health literacy needs of citizens, health managers are needed to:

- **Understand the differences between functional, interactive, and critical health literacy**, and how each can be developed through different approaches to skill-building and health education.
- **Increase the proportion of quality health information** available to the public by fostering more transparent health communication, utilising widely accessible media channels, upskilling health professionals in communication skills, and raising awareness of the importance of media literacy to reduce the impact of misinformation.
- **Promote better digital health** by equipping citizens with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully use technologies that improve physical and mental health outcomes while mitigating potential risks such as excessive screen time and social media addiction.
- **Implement broad, multi-level governance initiatives** to encourage a transition to health-promoting, patient-centred models of care.
- **Ensure legal compliance and foster trust** by adhering to privacy laws and data protection regulations, upholding patient confidentiality, and building confidence in technology integration.
- **Nurture cooperation between stakeholders across the health sector** and beyond, recognising that health outcomes are influenced by the complex interplay between human, animal, and environmental factors, as exemplified by the One Health approach.
- **Promote equitable distribution of skills and resources** by advocating for a balanced allocation of training and education based on national and regional differences, thereby promoting equal opportunities for health literacy improvement.
- **Implement comprehensive monitoring mechanisms** to track progress towards health literacy goals and support evidence-based advancements in programme and policy development.
- **Engage the health and care workforce** to co-create and co-deliver education and training programmes, including public messaging on health promotion topics.

## Other notable findings from the survey included:



The European Health Literacy Survey (HLS-EU) measured health literacy in eight countries (n = 8 × 1000 people) using the new measurement tool HLS-EU-Q.

On average, every second person surveyed showed limited health literacy.

A social gradient was demonstrated in the surveyed population.

The distribution of health literacy levels differed substantially across countries (29–62%).

Monitoring health literacy can support professional and political decision-making to improve health literacy in the EU to the benefit of the population's health.

## Other EU resources and literature focusing on Health Literacy:



Health Literacy Europe Network



Guide to Health Literacy by Council of Europe ‘Contributing to trust building and equitable access to healthcare’



M-POHL – WHO Action Network on Measuring Population and Organisational Health Literacy



EuroHealthNet Report on ‘Digital Health Literacy for Europe’s digital future’



Health literacy around the world: policy approaches to wellbeing through knowledge and empowerment by The Economist



Digital health literacy (own initiative opinion) by European Economic and Social Committee



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