Health literacy: a proactive approach to health care

The mega-popularity of the TV star Dr. Mehmet Oz – one of North America's most beloved and trusted health-care advisors – suggests that we have a desire and a need to learn more about health. It may be tips about weight loss, how to reduce your blood pressure or the latest and greatest naturopathic remedies that interest you about his show. Ultimately, though, we all watch for the same reason and all want the same thing – to be healthy.

This begs the question, how much do we really know about health, and how empowered are we to take care of our own health matters? How 'health literate' are we?

What is health literacy?

Health literacy is your ability to access and interpret health information and make well-informed decisions about your health. It affects your ability to:

- Navigate the health-care system
- Comprehend numerical concepts such as cholesterol and blood sugar levels
- Understand nutrition labels and prescription dosages
- Share personal information, such as health history, with care providers
- Manage chronic diseases and care for yourself

Health literate people have the ability to solve problems, process information and understand what steps to take to achieve better health. But, according to the Canadian Council on Learning, many of us are health illiterate. In fact, 60 per cent of Canadians lacked the necessary skills to manage their health and health-care needs adequately, and the most susceptible populations are seniors, the unemployed and immigrants (especially those who do not speak English).

Why is health literacy important?

Every day you are confronted with health information and often you don't even realize it. As you grocery shop, fill a prescription, feed your family, visit the doctor or go for a massage, you are presented with information that may impact your health. Not knowing what health questions to ask, which health-related information to provide or what choices to make affect your health literacy and your ability to:

- Complete medical forms
- Read nutrition labels
- Find health-care providers and services
- Provide relevant personal health information
- Manage a chronic condition or disease
- Understand the proper way to take medication

To make healthy choices, everyone needs health information that they can understand. Health literacy is simply good for your health.

Health literacy in Canada

- 88 per cent of Canadians age 65 and older need help with today's health information demands
- 48 per cent of adults over 16 have low literacy skills that limit their involvement in society
- There is a strong link between health literacy and health – people with the lowest levels are 250 per cent more likely to report being in poor or fair health compared to those with the highest levels

Seven Strategies for Improving Your Health Literacy

Your health literacy – or how well you understand, process and follow health information you receive—can impact your health. In fact, studies suggest that if your health literacy is poor you're more likely to skip

important screening tests, manage a chronic condition less effectively, and enter the health care system sicker than someone who is health literate. Boost your health literacy skills by:

- Writing questions down. If you have a health concern or if you are trying to understand a recent diagnosis, you might have a ton of questions running through your mind. Avoid missing out on valuable information by writing questions down beforehand. Not sure what to ask? Try starting with the basics:
  What is my diagnosis?
  Will I need medical tests? What will the test results tell me?
  What is the medication you are prescribing me? How do I take it? What are the side effects?
  Do I need to make lifestyle changes?

- Keeping a list of allergies, medications and dosages with you at all times. This is especially important in an emergency but can also help your doctor or pharmacist spot potentially dangerous drug combinations. Make sure to review the list with your doctor from time to time so you're both clear about when and how much you're taking.

- Bringing an "interpreter" to medical appointments. If English is your second language, having a fluent friend or family member with you to translate information can be very helpful. If you speak English but feel lost when it comes to medical jargon, consider asking a loved one in the medical field—whether they're a nurse, doctor or other medical professional—to join you and help "translate" the information for you or ask questions you might not have considered.

- Repeating information as you understand it. This will not only help you process the information better, but also allow the medical professional to correct any information you've misinterpreted.

- Speaking up if you don't understand. Don't feel embarrassed if you don't "get" some of the information. Remember your doctor or medical professional has spent years studying the information you've only had a few minutes to process. Ask your doctor to repeat the details more simply if he or she is using complex medical language.

- Getting more from reliable online sources. There are some great websites on the Internet aimed at providing valuable, straightforward health information. Ensure the information is based on solid research (i.e. university or hospital studies) and that the site isn't trying to sell you something. Government sites and those run by not-for-profit organizations are usually a great place to start. Be sure to print off information you find interesting or have questions about to bring to your next medical appointment.

- Joining a support group. If you've recently been diagnosed with a medical condition, connecting with others in a similar situation is a great way to bond and improve your health literacy—especially since many support groups are backed by not-for-profit associations that make it their mission to provide clear, easy to understand information and tips to deal with the condition.

Being more health literate can not only help you improve your physical health, but it can also boost your emotional well-being. After all, the more involved and informed you are in your health care decisions, the more in control you'll feel over your body and your situation.