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Health Literacy:  
what's it got to do  
with us?

# Inhaler Fail



<https://youtu.be/bDHEEV0M62Y>



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What is Health Literacy  
and why does it  
matter?

# One definition

“Health literacy refers to the **personal characteristics** and **social resources** needed for individuals and communities to access, understand, appraise and use information services to make decisions about health”

World Health Organization

# Health literacy: a two-sided coin



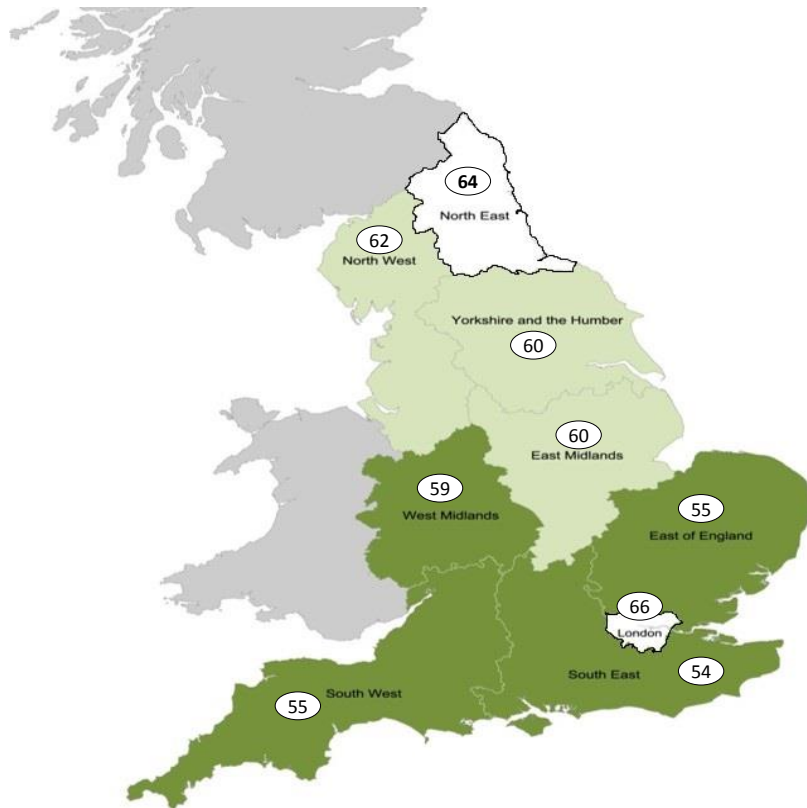
## Personal

- Health literacy is partly about people having the skills, knowledge and confidence they require to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing
- People with the lowest levels of language, literacy and numeracy are those who experience the poorest health outcomes in society

## Societal

- Health literacy is also about how effectively information is given to people and how effectively services are set up to ensure they can be accessed, understood, appraised and used by people who need them

# National and regional picture: % of adults aged 16-65 years for whom health information is too complex



Text (literacy)  
AND  
Numeracy  
component of  
health materials

National average  
61%

*Rowlands et al (2015)*

# Why does health literacy matter?

## Impact on the health system:

- Inappropriate decision for the patient
- Missed appointments
- Wasted medication
- Inappropriate use of services e.g. greater use of A&E
- More likely to be hospitalised / longer hospital stays



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# Why does health literacy matter?

## Personal impacts:

*People with lower health literacy/education levels are more likely to have:*

- More unhealthy behaviours; alcohol, poor diet/obesity, smoking
- Fewer healthy behaviours; good diet/normal weight
- Lower levels of self-rated health
- Lower response to public healthy living campaigns



- a lady who thought her “positive” cancer diagnosis was a good thing and couldn’t understand why she wasn’t getting better;
- a lady who sprayed her inhaler on her neck because she had been told to “spray it on her throat”. Nobody had checked whether she realised she had to open her mouth and inhale;
- a gentleman referred under the two week cancer wait process who didn’t turn up for his appointment because he didn’t know the sign for Radiology was the same as for the X Ray Department. He was too embarrassed to ask for directions;



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- a group of young women who did not know where their cervix was;
- a group of young people who didn't know where their waist was;
- a lady with diabetes who didn't realise there was a connection between what she ate and her ability to self-manage her condition;
- a lady who thought that her chemotherapy wouldn't do her very much good because her IV line was on the other side of the body to where her cancer had been.

Who is most likely to be affected by health literacy issues?



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# Who is most likely to be affected by health literacy issues?

- People living with socio-economic disadvantage
- People with low educational attainment
- Older people
- People who have a long term health condition
- People with disabilities
- People with sensory impairment
- People with low information and technology skills

# Levels Change



“I’m a professor, yet the first thing I did was I put ‘breast cancer’ into Google... because you’re frightened.”

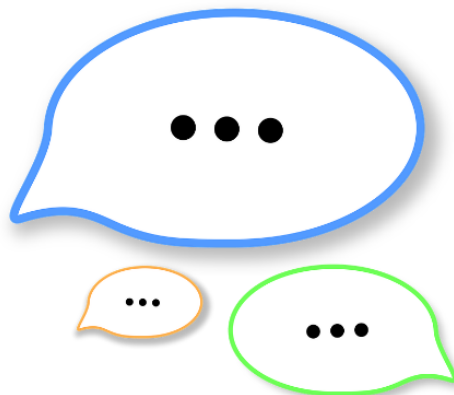
Trisha Greenhalgh



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# How has Health Literacy impacted on you ?

Think of examples of when you may have encountered health literacy issues within your role or personal examples from friends and family.



# What can Library & Knowledge Services do in practical terms?



- Signpost the best sources of information
- Work in partnership to raise awareness – joint campaigns
- Learn from each other

# Next Steps?



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# Useful Resources

- Role of NHS libraries

<https://kfh.libraryservices.nhs.uk/health-literacy-an-issue-for-life/>

- Health Literacy Toolkit

<https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/health-literacy>

- Health Literacy Curated Collection

<https://www.healthliteracy.org.uk>

- Health Literacy Place (Scotland)

<https://www.healthliteracyplace.org.uk>

Thank you to Joanne Naughton  
Health Education England

Final roll out session of health literacy  
awareness training:

<https://www.lksnorth.nhs.uk/events/health-literacy-awareness-training/>.