

# Poor health literacy a public health issue

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America's poor record on health literacy is a public health issue, but one that can be fixed - not by logging onto the internet but by increased interaction with your fellow human beings, a Michigan State University researcher argues.

In a paper published in the journal *BMC Public Health*, MSU's R.V. Rikard and colleagues found that people who are more connected with others on a personal level are more literate when it comes to health matters.

Specifically, the researchers discovered that people who are more engaged civically - those who vote and volunteer - are more health literate than those who don't.

"Gathering information is more than just getting on the internet," said Rikard, a post-doctoral research associate in the Department of Media and Information and lead author of the paper. "It's face-to-face. It's engaging with community.

"If you volunteer, you are more likely to have a higher level of [health literacy](#)."

Health literacy is defined as a person's ability to not only process and understand basic health information, but to be able to act on that information and make the appropriate decisions.

Rikard said that while gathering health information from the internet is not an all-bad thing to do, ultimately health literacy "is a social concept and should be treated as such." He said when people discuss this information with others, they have a better chance of understanding it.

"Generally speaking, the best sources of information are family and friends," he said. "But it depends on the context. A young man diagnosed with HIV probably wouldn't want to discuss that with his parents. But a woman in menopause would talk about it with other women."

To do the research, Rikard and colleagues did a

deep analysis of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, a 2003 project that surveyed more than 14,000 Americans on their health literacy levels.

Some of their other findings included:

- People who frequent libraries have higher health literacy than those who don't.
- Women have higher health literacy than men.
- People who are married, or are living as married, have higher health literacy than those who are single.
- Among ethnic minorities, those born in the United States have better health literacy than those born in their native countries.

"One of the lessons from this is we have to do a better job with [health communication](#)," Rikard said. "We have to put it in a social context, knowing where people live and how they communicate with one another."

**More information:** R. V. Rikard et al, Examining health literacy disparities in the United States: a third look at the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), *BMC Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-016-3621-9](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-3621-9)

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