



NAVIGATION

Could low nutrition literacy be to blame for unhealthy choices?



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It's easy to assume that someone not complying with dietary recommendations is doing so by choice. The underlying reason, however, may not be quite so simple: low nutrition literacy may be to blame. Those with a low level of nutrition literacy lack the skills required to access, understand and act upon nutrition information, which impacts their health decisions and behaviours. Increasing awareness amongst health and nutrition professionals and addressing low nutrition literacy through tailored communications could help to reduce inequalities in health, as well as the impact of lifestyle diseases.^[1]

It's not just about reading and writing

Nutrition literacy is an aspect of the broader concept of health literacy and determines a person's ability to access, process and understand nutrition information in order to make nutrition decisions. Like health literacy, nutrition literacy is assessed at three levels: functional, which involves applying basic literacy skills for example to read and understand a food label; interactive, involving application of cognitive and interpersonal communication skills to interact with nutrition advisors or to search for and use nutrition information; and critical, the ability to critically

analyse nutrition information and engage in dietary behaviours.^[2] As well as written literacy, oral and aural literacy, numeracy, and cultural and conceptual knowledge are also important aspects.^[1]

Nutrition literacy is often associated with general literacy and education level, with studies finding higher levels of nutrition knowledge amongst those with higher education.^[3]

Low nutrition literacy can impact a person's evaluation of the effectiveness of dietary advice, relevance and seriousness of health risks, as well as the benefits of adopting healthier dietary habits. In studies, participants with low education levels have been found to possess lower nutritional knowledge, were less likely to believe in diet-disease relationships, and demonstrated less consideration for their health.^[4] Those with low nutrition literacy may also find it difficult to apply information from food labels to nutrition decisions, with complex nutrition labelling, health claims, and discrepancies between product serving sizes and recommended serving sizes adding to the confusion. Conflicting nutrition advice in the media can also make it challenging for those with lower levels of nutrition literacy to interpret the credibility of this information.^[5]

Low nutrition literacy can have a wider impact

Research focusing specifically on nutrition literacy is fairly limited; however, several studies have uncovered associations between factors contributing to low nutrition literacy, such as education level, and compliance with positive nutrition behaviours.^{[6][7]} Although general education plays a role, another study found that specific nutrition knowledge and beliefs are significant factors when it comes to meeting recommendations for intake of fruit and vegetables, indicating that nutrition education in particular, not just education alone, is essential for improving diet quality.^[8] Nutrition literacy can also have a wider impact: a recent US study of parents and children found that as parental nutrition literacy increased, so too did the child's diet quality.^[9]

The intentions are there, but ...

Although many people respond to public health messages and attempt to eat healthier, low nutrition literacy coupled with inadequate or contradictory nutrition information from unreliable sources can hamper these good intentions. A British study revealed feelings of cynicism and blame towards policymakers for vague and contradictory public health communications, which led participants to instead rely on food advertisements, product labelling and other questionable nutrition information.^[10] Respondents of another small survey did recognise dietitians, nutritionists and GPs as reliable information sources; however, in practice most favoured the internet, friends, family and magazines for nutrition information.^[11]

Tailored nutrition communication is key

Even seemingly common nutrition terminology can prove a source of confusion: a US study found that participants with lower literacy levels were unfamiliar with terms such as “energy-dense”, thinking it was positive that the food would give more energy.^[12] It is critical, then, that health professionals are aware of their client’s nutrition literacy level and adapt communication of dietary advice accordingly, checking for understanding and using visual aids where appropriate.

Given that non-compliance with dietary recommendations may not be as straightforward as it seems, nutrition communication at all levels needs to take into account the nutrition literacy level of the target audience and appropriately tailor language, content, organisation, structure and format.^[13] Although there are many other factors that can influence nutrition decisions such as income and cooking skills, in order for someone to practice healthy eating, they must first have an adequate understanding as to what a healthy diet is.^[3]

Photo by [USDAgov](#) 

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Originally from New Zealand, Sandra has been living in Oslo, where she recently completed a Bachelor in Public Health Nutrition. She has a passion for nutrition and fitness, with a particular interest in nutrition psychology and digestive health. She is now based in Brisbane, where you can generally find her at the local farmers market, trying out new cafés or enjoying a riverside run.