

Introduction

Background

Welcome to “*A Health Literacy Manual for Older Adults*” – a compilation of health literacy lesson plans to be used by literacy tutors and health educators who work with older adult learners.

We know from the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Learning Skills Survey (IALSS) that over 70 percent of Canadian seniors have difficulty with reading and writing skills. Researchers say that this may be due to the fact that many older adults left school early or that reading skills are lost over time if not practiced. This can seriously compromise their health and well-being due to their inability to obtain health information, as well as not understanding instructions. Some studies show that seniors with low literacy skills are admitted to hospitals more often than those with reading skills, they tend to stay longer and are more likely to suffer from mental health problems. (Rootman)

The term “lifelong learning” implies that people can improve their **literacy** skills at any age. These skills are defined as “the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities- at home and in the community- to achieve one’s goals and develop one’s knowledge and potential”. **Health literacy** is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), in part, as the ability to obtain and understand health information and to use it to improve one’s health or that of families and communities. (Rootman)

Some older adults have stated that there is a need for health information specific to them. Dr. John O’Brien-Bell, a past president of the Canadian Medical Association, recently stated that “Canadians, especially the elderly need health education, preventative medical advice and ongoing continuing care.” A 2005 University of Montreal survey of 5,000 Canadian women, aged 55 to 95, indicated that they wanted to know more about preventing disease, promoting

independence and ensuring good quality of life. The survey also showed that they want to be active participants with physicians and other health care providers. (Tannenbaum)

What this manual contains

This manual contains eight lesson plans to help older adults enhance their literacy skills while learning about health topics that are of interest to them. The lesson plans are entitled:

- 1) Determinants of Health for Older Adults
- 2) Active Living
- 3) Healthy Eating
- 4) Understanding Food Labels
- 5) Food Safety
- 6) Visiting your Health Provider
- 7) Understanding Medication Labels
- 8) Practicing Prevention

In addition to short readings on the above topics, lessons include a variety of literacy activities such as fill-in-the-blanks, word searches, brainstorming, matching-the-columns, scrapbooking exercises, and completing a crossword puzzle. Learners can practice their writing skills by developing a weekly calendar of exercise activities, completing sentence starters, writing about their own experiences, developing a daily menu using Canada's Food Guide and completing a sample menu plan obtained from the Dietitians of Canada website. Other writing activities include listing some of the questions seniors might ask when visiting a health provider, writing a short story about a successful visit to a health provider, as well as entering information into a personal medication record book.

Learners can also practice their problem-solving skills by answering questions on food labeling activity sheets, as well as other questions related to prescription labels, over-the-counter medicine labels and warning labels.

At the end of the manual is the appendix section containing solutions to word searches and match-the-column exercises, as well as answers to the questions on some of the activity sheets.

References:

- 1) Rootman, Irving, and Ronson, Barbara, 2003. “Literacy and Health in Canada: What We Have Learned and What Can Help in the Future?” Available at: www.nlhp.cpha.ca
- 2) O’Brien-Bell, Dr. John, 2005. “Aging and Primary Care: Personal Reflections” from the *CMA Leadership Series: Elder Care 2005*, p.48 or available at www.cma.ca/index.cfm/ci_id/46150/la_id/1.htm
- 3) Tannenbaum C, Mayo N, Ducharme F. “Older women’s health priorities and perceptions of care delivery: results of the WOW health survey”. *CMAJ* 2005; 173(2):153-9.