

## Introduction

Health literacy is increasingly recognized as a necessary element of all efforts to improve health. Health literacy is critical for people's search for and use of health information; adoption of healthy behaviors; and decision-making about health issues in the workplace, community, and society. Furthermore, health literacy is central to people's ability to access the public health and healthcare systems, communicate with health professionals, and engage in self-care and chronic disease management.

There is mounting evidence that the complex demands of modern health systems do not match up with people's knowledge and skills. Many Americans have limited health literacy, affecting their ability to locate providers, fill out medical forms, understand food or drug labels, or act on important public health alerts (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, & Paulsen, 2006). This, in turn, impacts health outcomes, healthcare costs, and quality of care.

Concern about the scope and implications of limited health literacy in the United States led the Office of the Surgeon General to convene the "Workshop on Improving Health Literacy" on September 7, 2006 in Bethesda, Maryland.

The goal of the workshop was to identify the most important public health issues and research needs in health literacy from a variety of perspectives, including those of health care organizations and providers, the research community, and educators. The workshop was structured to compile the best evidence from experts in the field to enhance understanding of the public health consequences of limited health literacy.