



Institute for  
Healthcare Advancement

Advancing Health Literacy Toward Health Equity

# Health Literacy Solutions in Action: The HEAL Program

## Building Health Literacy Skills for Patients and Providers



### Key Takeaways

#### The HEAL Program:

- teaches adults how to read prescription labels and understand nutrition to take charge of their health
- gives healthcare teams practical strategies to communicate clearly and respectfully with patients
- delivers proven results, improving participants' knowledge and confidence while earning recognition from CDC

# Introduction: Why Health Literacy Matters

Low health literacy affects more adults than obesity, diabetes, HIV/AIDS and breast cancer combined! An estimated thirty-five percent of all adults in the U.S. do not have the ability to understand basic health information and services to make appropriate decisions. People with low health literacy are more likely to skip important preventative measures and delay seeking help until they are sicker. They're more likely to have chronic conditions and less likely to manage them effectively. They are significantly more likely to report their health as poor.

## Real-Life Impact of Low Health Literacy

There are many real-life examples of the dangers of misunderstanding medical information. A mother nearly killed her infant by not diluting the baby's formula because she could not read the instructions. Another mother did not know what "oral" meant and gave her child medicine by ear instead of by mouth. Understanding medical terms, instructions, and procedures is critical not only for adults, but also for the children and other family members in their care. For those people coping with chronic illnesses – or those who are at risk for developing such illnesses – being health literate is essential to their well-being.

### About Literacy for Life and the HEAL Program

[Literacy for Life](#), a Community-Based Literacy Organization, serves adults in Greater Williamsburg, Hampton and Newport News. Learners include those from the most vulnerable populations who are at an increased risk of poor health outcomes: racial and ethnic minorities, older adults and people with low-income levels, limited English proficiency or less than a high school education. The HEAL Program was developed to teach the skills needed for individuals to take control of their health.



# HEAL Classes: Meeting Learners Where They Are

While there is plenty of health information available, it isn't always accessible to the most vulnerable populations. Most of the information is written at too high a level, assumes knowledge of health vocabulary and of the medical system, and requires digital literacy to access it. HEAL classes are designed to meet learners where they are with their literacy or language skills. There are three levels: two levels are for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and one level is for English speakers with low health literacy. Topics covered include understanding nutrition labels, appropriate use of emergency services, how to read prescription labels, the importance of prevention and screenings, and how to check for understanding during a doctor's appointment. Targeted recruitment is important. The most successful classes have had a trusted advocate to encourage class enrollment. This may be a social worker, a pastor, or a housing manager. HEAL classes are delivered where people already meet and feel comfortable such as churches, other non-profits, the workplace, schools, senior living facilities and low-income housing.

## Partnering with Healthcare Teams

Communication is a two-way process, which is why The HEAL Program takes a two-pronged approach and includes a 30-minute presentation to deliver to health care teams. The purpose is to raise awareness about the importance of effective and respectful communication with low-health literate patients and includes practical tools and strategies.

## Program Outcomes and Recognition

The HEAL Program has been evaluated by The Schroeder Center for Health Policy at William & Mary which showed that HEAL participants made statistically significant improvement in health knowledge and confidence. It has also been endorsed by the CDC as an organization exemplifying the goals in the National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy.

After years of development and testing, The HEAL Program is now a turnkey program providing all the tools and resources for organizations to implement a health literacy program.

### Learn More

To learn more about becoming a HEAL Program licensee, please contact Fiona Van Gheem at [fvangheem@wm.edu](mailto:fvangheem@wm.edu).



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