

Reading is good for your health

October 8 2013, by Trond Egil Toft



Written health-related information is often complex. Texts usually contain many difficult words and are frequently written in a style which is foreign to poor readers. Credit: Asbjørn Jensen

People with poor reading skills are likely to be less healthy than those who read easily, according to recent research. Literacy skills are important for keeping in good shape.

"Some people don't seem to obtain necessary [health](#) information because they're not good readers," says associate professor Kjersti Lundetrae at the University of Stavanger's Reading Centre.

Together with fellow associate professor Egil Gabrielsen at the Reading Centre and general practitioner Reidar Stokke, she has written an article on this subject entitled Health in Every Word.

This concludes that a relationship exists between self-perceived health and literacy, and draws on data from the international adult literacy and life skills survey (ALL).

Pains

Self-perceived health can mean feeling pains, physical condition hampering everyday activities, fatigue, or emotional problems which affect social relationships.

"Other research shows that self-perceived health is closely related to actual well-being," explains Lundetræ. "So adults with low literacy skills, as a group, are likely to be in worse physical shape than those who can read well."

A perception of [poor health](#) increases among weak readers with age. It is greatest among those aged 45-65 and lowest in the youngest group, aged 16-24.

"When you're young, your health will usually be good regardless of how well or poorly you look after yourself," Lundetræ points out.

"So it's natural that the relationship between weak reading skills and the perception of poor health rises with age. That's when you usually feel the effects of an unhealthy lifestyle or failing to look after yourself properly."

Compared with gender, age, education and income, literacy is the variable which has the strongest correlation with self-perceived health.

But this applies only to physical condition. The results show no similar correlation between literacy skills and mental health.

Communicated

"Advice on nutrition, healthy diet and physical activity is increasingly communicated through newspaper and magazine articles and on the internet," Lundetræ explains.

"We receive a great deal of information by reading. It's conceivable that certain people miss out on important health advice because they read poorly and seldom."

A brief visit to the family doctor is often supplemented with printed advice in the form of a brochure or a leaflet supplied with medicine.

How well people understand such written details could be crucial for how good they are at looking after their own health, Lundetræ observes. Health-related text is often complicated. It can contain a lot of technical terms, and is frequently badly written. That makes it difficult to grasp for [poor readers](#).

"Materials in a form they aren't used to, or containing unfamiliar words, are hard to understand. People with low [literacy skills](#) become more vulnerable in their encounter with such texts."

Improvement

A general improvement in [reading skills](#) might accordingly give more people better health and, in the longer terms, have a beneficial effect on the cost of health services.

In addition, the adult literacy survey confirms the need to take a close look at the way health-related information is formulated.

"Since a lot of those who are most in need of such knowledge are poor readers, these texts have to be easy to read," Lundetræ emphasises.

"They must be written in a language which is not too technical or which uses too many words, and must communicate clearly and simply."

Provided by University of Stavanger

Citation: Reading is good for your health (2013, October 8) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-good-health.html>

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