



IHLA Statement to the WHO on health literacy as an essential life-saving strategy during the pandemic

Statement from the International Health Literacy Association (IHLA) to the Director General of the WHO on health literacy for all

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, health literacy has manifested itself as an essential life-saving determinant of health and of healthy behavior. COVID-19 has given rise to the COVID-19 infodemic spreading dangerous misinformation.

Inaccurate information undermines the efforts of governments, WHO, and public health authorities to contain the spread of COVID-19. Citizens and governments and other official agencies are dependent on health literacy to make the best use of available information. The epidemiological curve flattens when people can find, understand, judge and use evidence-based information regarding the risk of contracting the virus and of effective prevention, such as handwashing, social distancing, and wearing masks.

Likewise, a health literate population is more likely to successfully cope with navigating health services during an acute outbreak, including a recent shift to remote, virtual health services. When populations are health literate, they can handle the 'infodemic,' judging and disregarding fake news so less harm ensues. When organizations and health systems mitigate health literacy barriers, they can provide timely clear communication and promote empowerment and responsibility among the public to overcome the threat of COVID-19.

Health literacy is important within the levels of policy, governance, decision-making and administration where COVID-19 policy is made, actions are planned, and recommendations are given. Public information that can be understood and followed, which contains meaning and relevance, is essential to counteract COVID-19. Yet, research suggests more than a third of the population may not be able to benefit from crucial information due to lack of accessibility, understandability, appraisability or applicability of public health messaging.

The IHLA, its Executive Board, Committees and Interest Groups, would like to stress the importance of investing in health literacy as an asset for global health and an accelerator of the sustainable development goals.

The IHLA endorses continuous commitment to collaborate with the WHO and urges regional and country health and public health leadership to continue efforts to improve health literacy, including:

- The United Nations' Shanghai Declaration on promoting health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which highlights health literacy, good governance and urban health as focal areas for action.

- The WHO Action Network on Measuring Population and Organizational Health Literacy (M-POHL Network) which was established under the umbrella of the WHO European Health Information Initiative (EHII) and aligned with Health 2020, the European policy framework for health and well-being.
- The WHO Action network on Health Literacy for Prevention and Control of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) which is instrumental to build peoples' individual and collective capacities to become informed participants in health decision-making and to enable tangible progress towards beating NCDs.
- The WHO Working Group on Health Literacy in Schools in the European Region.
- The WHO European roadmap for implementation of health literacy initiatives through the life course and the resolution to enhance the efforts within the field of health literacy.

The IHLA encourages all Member States to work closely with the WHO to develop national strategies and programmes for health literacy during the pandemic crisis to ensure full transparency in comprehensive, timely, and culturally appropriate health information sharing among global communities. In addition, IHLA proposes the WHO lead the development of a global plan of action, which includes the measurement of health literacy in Member States, nationally and locally adapted interventions to advance health literacy for all, including a means to monitor progress.

We believe health literacy for all is the pre-requisite for people to manage their health and for those they love. In a dynamic world, where health information changes weekly due to new research and crucial findings related to the current pandemic, it is essential to invest in health literacy as an asset for individuals, families, communities, organizations, systems, and societies. Furthermore, the health literacy response of authorities, governments and professionals shapes the preparedness, the actions, and outcomes as people struggle to manage in the period of the COVID pandemic crisis.

We encourage heads-of-states and the WHO leadership to acknowledge health literacy as an essential life-saving strategy for governments during the pandemic and for the public health in general. Health literacy for all and in all health actions is a prominent catalyst to achieve health for all.

On behalf of the International Health Literacy Association

Kristine Sørensen

President

Founded in 2016, the [International Health Literacy Association \(IHLA\)](#) strives to promote and advance health literacy around the globe. Active in all the WHO regions, IHLA's members support health literacy responsiveness and capacity building in organizations and communities to shape health literate societies.