**Health Literacy in Aging Populations**

Health literacy is the “degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.” – Institute of Medicine

It involves the public and everyone working in health care and allows a person to find, understand, evaluate, communicate, and use information to make health decisions.

**Prevalence of Health Literacy in Aging Populations**

- Nearly half of all Americans, or 90 million people, have difficulty understanding and acting upon written or verbal health information. About one-third (29%) of adults 65 and older have below basic health literacy levels. ¹

- The same is true for Missouri, where an estimated 31% of adults ages 65-74 and 29% of adults over 75 had low or limited health literacy. ³

- Average scores on the test for Functional Health Literacy decreased by almost 1 point for every year increase in age. ⁴

**Cost of Health Literacy**

- Low health literacy costs the U.S. economy an estimated $106-$238 billion per year. ⁵ It is estimated that low/limited health literacy costs the Missouri economy $3.3 to $7.5 billion annually. ⁶

- Approximately 80% of all seniors have at least one chronic condition, which increases health literacy demands. Often times, these patients have lower health literacy skills, further increasing costs. In 2000, chronic conditions had direct medical costs of $510 billion; a number expected to double by 2020. ⁷

**Common Qualities of Aging Associated with Low Health Literacy**

- Decline in ability to process information ⁸
- Dementia/cognitive impairment
- Higher prevalence of chronic disease
- Worse physical or mental health
- Sensory impairment (audio/visual) ⁴
Effects of Health Literacy on Aging Populations

- Medicare enrollees with low health literacy are less likely to receive preventative health services such as vaccines and screenings.4
- Low health literacy may deter people from seeking treatment due to fear and confusion.9
- Increasing health literacy may be the most effective and direct approach to improving health status and decreasing hospital and emergency room use among the aging.10
- Inadequate functional health literacy (reading fluency) independently predicts overall mortality and cardiovascular mortality for community-dwelling persons over 65 years old.11

**Health Literacy as a Social Determinate of Health**12

![Health Literacy Diagram]

References