

## Canadian Attitudes toward Health and Learning

Learning about health is an important aspect of lifelong learning. It can directly affect individuals' overall level of well-being by allowing them to make informed decisions to improve their health.

More than half of all Canadians over the age of 12 report having at least one chronic condition.<sup>28</sup> By age 65, 77% of men and 85% of women have at least one chronic health condition.<sup>29</sup> Individuals who can learn about their health issues and manage the day-to-day details of living with their chronic conditions face better health outcomes than those who are unable to do so.<sup>30</sup> Well-informed patients are also able to reduce their need for health-care services.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the ability to access health-related information and to learn about health issues is critically important to all Canadians.

### Overview: What we asked, what Canadians told us

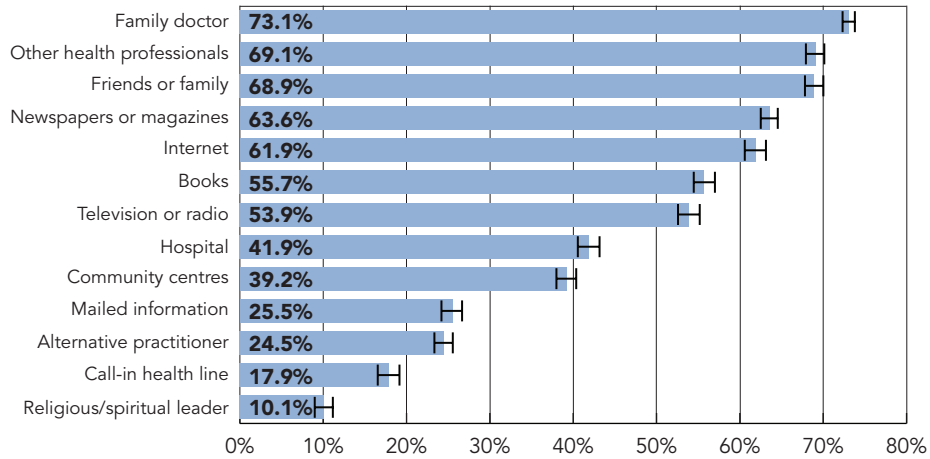
#### 1. What resources do Canadians use to learn about health issues?

- Friends or family members
- Family doctors
- Community health service centres, units or clinics (CLSCs in Quebec, and public health professionals such as nurses, dietitians, etc.)
- Call-in health lines or hotlines
- Internet
- Hospitals
- Alternative medical practitioners
- Other health professionals (e.g., pharmacists, dentists, physiotherapists, psychologists or other specialists)
- Religious or spiritual leaders
- Television or radio
- Newspapers or magazines
- Books
- Information received in the mail

Canadians rely on a variety of sources of information to learn about health, using an average of six different sources within the past twelve months. A majority of Canadians consult family doctors (73%) and other health professionals (69%), family and friends (69%), and newspapers and magazines (64%). Nearly two-thirds (62%) of Canadians look for health-related information on the internet; and over 50% turn to books and television. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that family doctors, general practitioners and the internet are among the most commonly used sources of health-related information.<sup>32,33,34</sup>

**Figure 33**

Percentage of Canadians who consult each source of health-related information



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

## 2. What prevents Canadians from using various sources of health-related information?

- Source was not considered
- Source was not available
- Source was inconvenient
- Not a reliable source of information
- Source was too expensive
- Not needed

The most frequently cited reason for not using the above sources of information was that these sources were not needed. Other reasons varied across types of sources. Some sources were considered unreliable (friends and family, television and radio, information received in the mail); other sources were unavailable (family doctors, internet, information received in the mail); and many other sources were simply never considered.

Table 1: Reasons for not using sources of health-related information		
Reason	Source	% of non-users citing reason
Not reliable	Friends/family	26%
	Television/radio	35%
	Mailed information	24%
Not available	Family doctors	25%
	Internet	24%
	Mailed information	29%
Not considered	Health centres	20%
	Hotlines	28%
	Alternative practitioners	21%
	Spiritual leaders	30%
	Newspapers/magazines	24%
	Books	26%

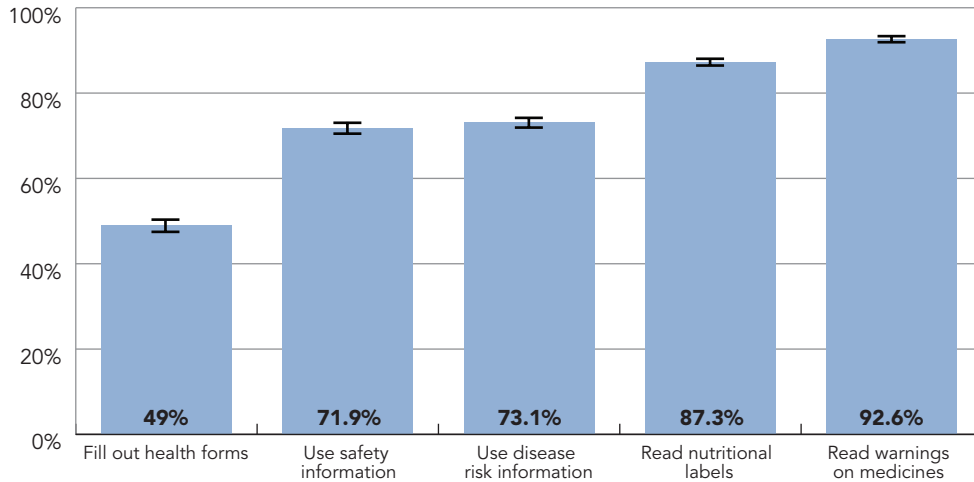
### 3. How strong do Canadians believe their health-literacy skills to be in the following areas?

- Reading nutritional labels on food packaging
- Reading directions, warnings or other information provided with new medicine
- Filling out forms in order to receive health benefits
- Using health and safety information to assess products
- Using health information to assess risk of developing disease or contracting infection

Health literacy is the ability to access, understand and use health-related information.<sup>35,36</sup> Canadians use their health-literacy skills in many different ways: only about half of Canadians report filling out forms to receive health benefits, but the majority of Canadians read and/or use health and safety information in a variety of contexts.

**Figure 34**

Proportion of Canadians who engage in activities requiring health-literacy skills

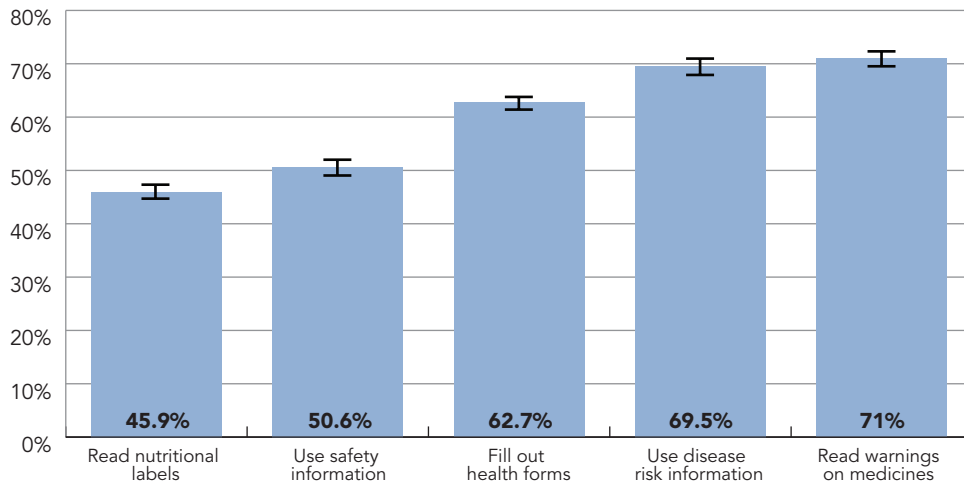


Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

Of those who perform various activities requiring health-literacy skills, Canadians are most confident in their ability to read directions and warnings on new medicines, and least confident in their ability to read nutritional labels.

**Figure 35**

Proportion of Canadians who engage in activities requiring health-literacy skills and report almost never having trouble understanding the health information



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

## Access to health information: Effects of age and education

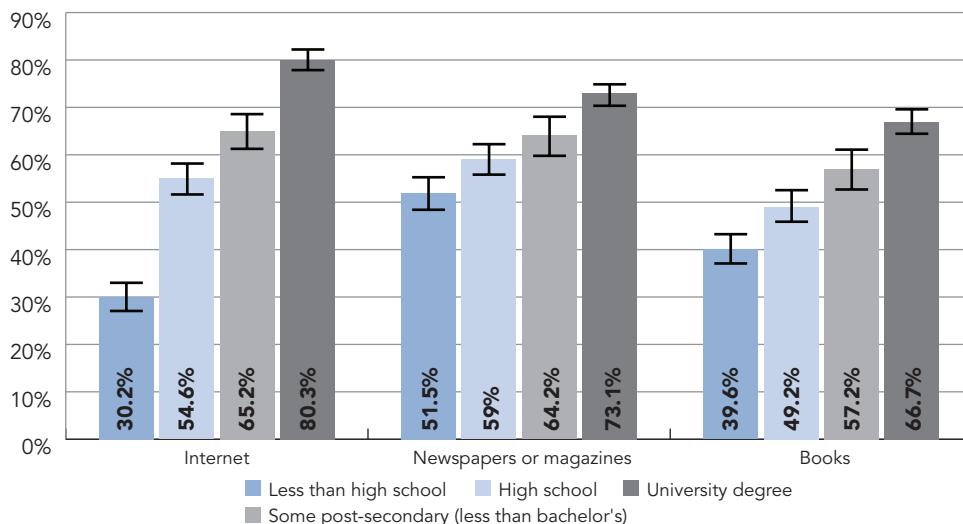
While SCAL 2008 results indicate that most Canadians search for health-related information through a variety of media and other sources, the results also show that certain groups of Canadians are more vulnerable when it comes to accessing health information. Factors that affect use of information include age and educational level.

There are differences in the sources of information used by younger and older Canadians. SCAL results reveal that, while younger Canadians (aged 18–24) report that they would turn first to family and friends (33%), the internet (28%) and a family doctor (22%), the majority of older respondents (aged 65–74) see their family doctor (62%) as the primary source of health-related information. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that, as the number of health-related problems increases with age, people will become more likely to turn to their family doctors for information.<sup>37,38,39</sup> Furthermore, while some studies indicate that computer literacy among older people is improving, this age group is still less likely to use the internet for information, compared to younger groups.<sup>40</sup>

Education level is another factor associated with the use of sources of health-related information, especially sources of information that depend on literacy skills. Canadians without a high-school diploma are much less likely to turn to the internet or to books and newspapers for health information than are Canadians with higher levels of education. For example, fewer than one-third (30%) of Canadians without a high-school diploma report using the internet to learn about health issues, compared to two-thirds (65%) of Canadians with some post-secondary education and 80% of respondents with a university degree. Similarly, the proportion of Canadians who obtain health information from books is 40% for respondents without a high-school diploma, and two-thirds (67%) for Canadians with a university degree.

**Figure 36**

Percentage of respondents who report using each source of health information in the past year, by education level



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

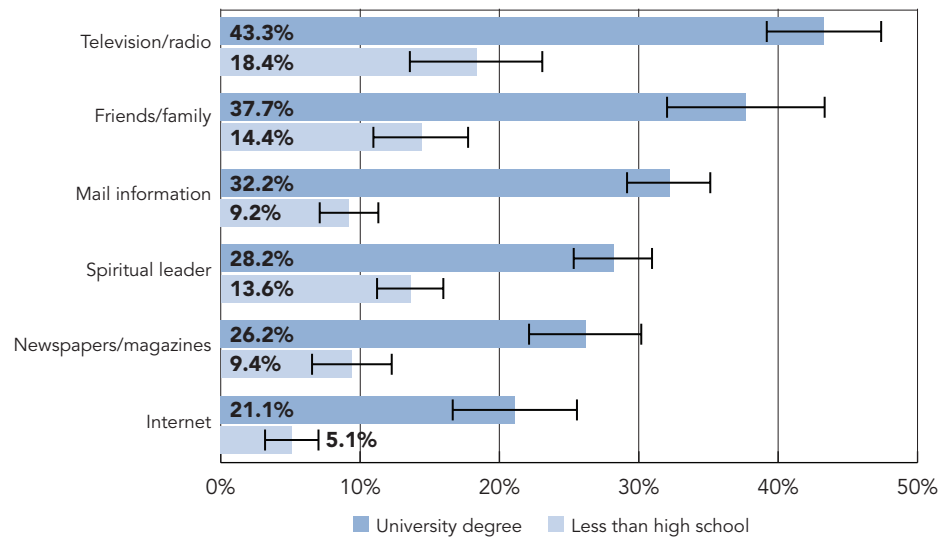
## Assessing the reliability of sources of health-related information

“Unreliability” is one of the reasons cited by Canadians for not using specific sources of health-related information. This scepticism is an important aspect of carefully assessing sources of health-related information.

Canadians with more education appear to be more sceptical of the reliability of a variety of different sources of information, and are more likely to report not using certain sources of information because of reliability concerns. For example, 43% of Canadians with university degrees report not using media such as television and radio to learn about health issues because these sources of information are unreliable, while only 18% of Canadians without a high-school diploma say the same.

**Figure 37**

Percentage of respondents who report not using sources of information due to concerns about their reliability, by education level



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

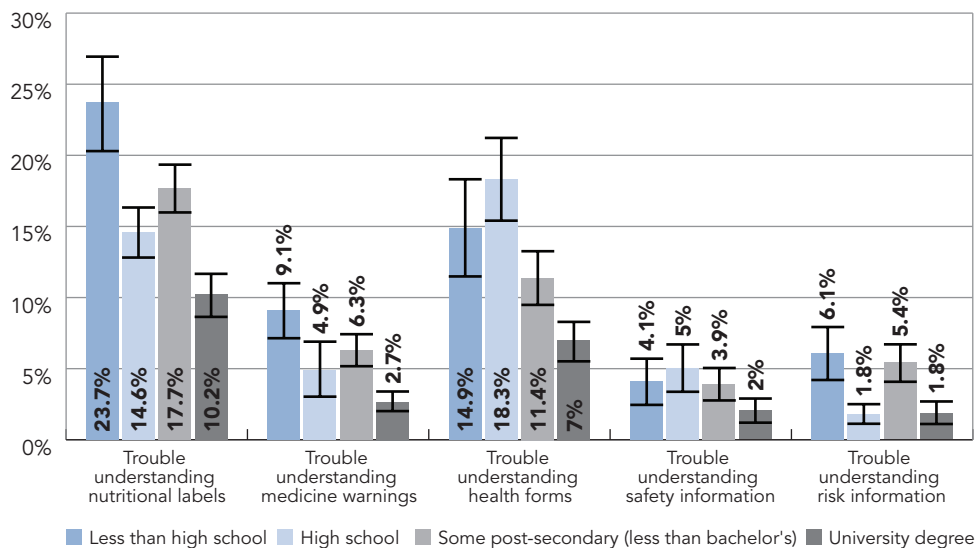
## Educational attainment and health-literacy skills

Health-literacy skills are essential for accessing, understanding and using health-related information to make sound health decisions. Recent reports suggest that health-literacy levels in the Canadian population are critically low: three in five (60%) Canadians do not have the health-literacy skills required to manage their everyday health and health-care needs.<sup>41</sup>

According to recent research, educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of health literacy.<sup>42,43</sup> SCAL 2008 results reveal a similar pattern: individuals with lower levels of education report having more trouble understanding health information in a variety of contexts. For example, nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents without a high-school diploma who report reading nutritional labels say that they have trouble understanding these labels frequently or almost always, compared to one in ten (10%) respondents with a university degree.

**Figure 38**

Percentage of respondents who report performing each activity and who report almost always or frequently having trouble understanding the written information associated with the activity



Source: Canadian Council on Learning. Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning, 2008

## Conclusion

Canadians consult a variety of sources of information to learn about health-related issues. Younger Canadians frequently turn to friends, family members and the internet, while older Canadians are more likely to turn to their family doctors. Canadians with more education make more frequent use of literacy-dependent sources of information including the internet, newspapers and magazines, and books. Canadians with more education also appear to be more sceptical of the reliability of various sources of health-related information, and are more confident of their health-literacy skills.