

HLS • EU

The European Health Literacy Project 2009-2012

1. Summary

The HLS-EU project aimed to **estimate the state of the art of health literacy in Europe** and to establish a sustainable approach to the advancement of health literacy in the region.

The outcomes include:

- the European Health Literacy Survey (HLS-EU)
- the network 'Health Literacy Europe'
- national advisory boards in Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

The outcome of the HLS-EU project provide **new grounds** for innovation in research and practice to develop people's health literacy and meet the needs for new solutions in healthcare.

4. Results

The survey has provided **crucial information** in terms of health literacy related to healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion.

The results show that **47% on average have risk of limited health literacy**, and that there is a social gradient, which need to be addressed.

Vulnerable groups are identified and include people with no or low education, socio-economic deprived and people with self-reported ill health.

The cross-national comparison shows that health literacy **levels differ substantially across the eight countries** (Figure 1). The Netherlands provides the best national results.

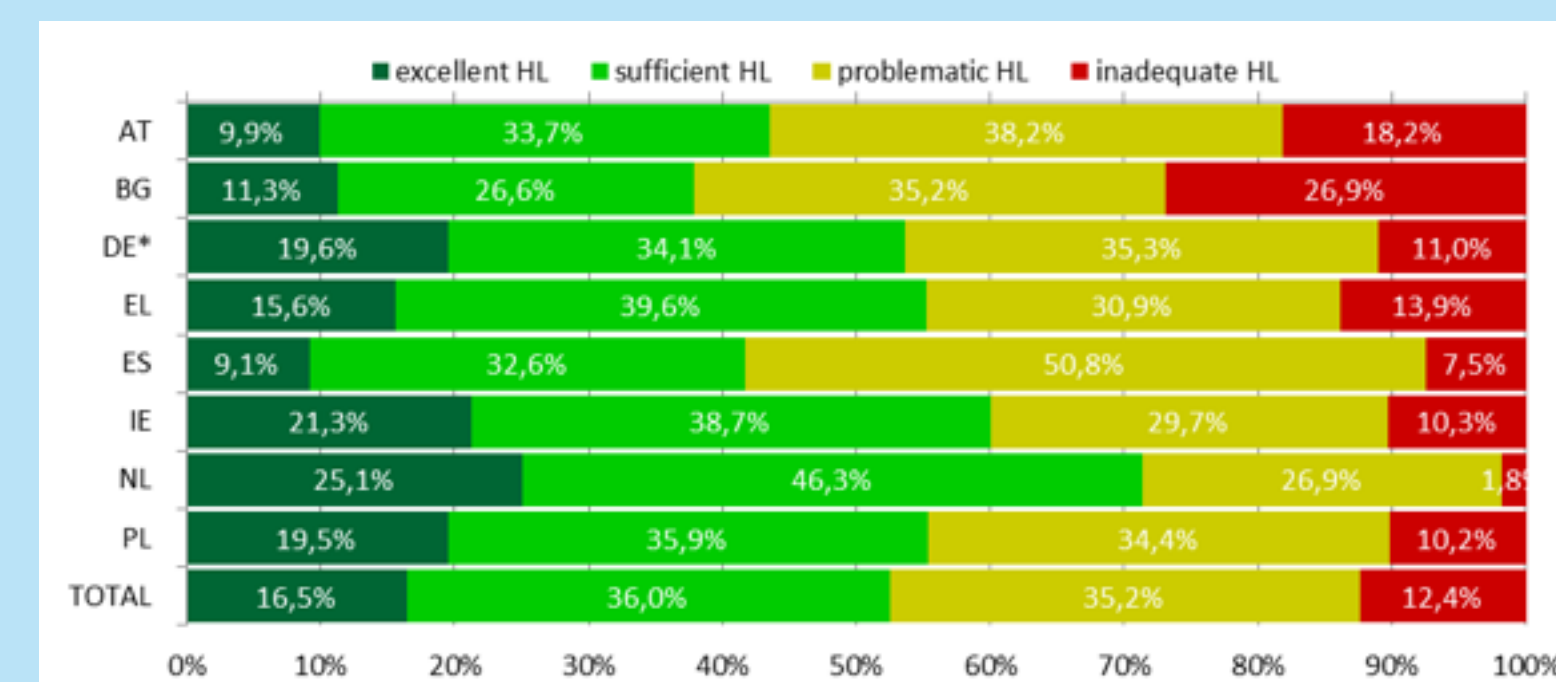
2. Introduction

Health literacy is identified as a critical empowerment strategy, which constitutes the **ability to make sound health decisions** in the context of everyday life. According to the HLS-EU consortium: *Health literacy is linked to literacy and entails people's knowledge, motivation and confidence to access, understand, appraise and apply health information to make judgments and take decisions in everyday life in terms of healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion to promote and maintain quality of life during the life course.*

People with limited health literacy are in risk of having less health knowledge, lower health status, higher utilization of health services, and higher health care costs. For the first time **the HLS-EU survey provides a trans-national overview** of the situation in Europe.

Figure 1:

Figure 1 shows the four level health literacy index results for the eight participating countries in the HLS-EU survey. An expression of **'limited health literacy'** is seen when combining the red 'inadequate level' with the yellow 'problematic level' of health literacy.



6. The HLS-EU consortium

- Maastricht University (NL)
- Ludwig Boltzman Institute for Health Promotion (AT)
- Faculty of Medicine, Sofia (BG)
- National Centre for Health, NRW (DE)
- National School of Public Health (GR)
- University College Dublin (IE)
- National Institute for Health and Environment (NL)
- Institute of Cardiology, Warsaw (PL)
- University of Murcia (ES)

3. Methods

The HLS-EU survey applied the conceptually based **HLS-EU-Q** measurement tool designed by the HLS-EU consortium. It contains **47 items covering 12 sub-dimensions of health literacy**. The tool was pre-tested in focus groups in three countries and field tested using face to face interviews in two countries.

The survey was conducted with face to face interviews in summer 2011 according to Eurobarometer standards. It included a total of **8000 participants in eight countries**: Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

The results refers to a **four level health literacy index** indicating health literacy to be: **Excellent, sufficient, problematic or inadequate**.

5. Conclusion

The HLS-EU project has **contributed to the field of health literacy** with a new definition and concept of health literacy accompanied by a tool to measure health literacy in populations. It has generated first time data on health literacy (n=8000) for comparative analysis across eight European countries and built up eight national advisory groups and an international network with European and global representation to secure valorisation of the results.

The HLS-EU consortium recommends on basis of the survey results and the profound review of global research, health literacy to be a **public health issue**, which need to be treated in its own rights by decision-makers in healthcare and educational sectors.

7. Project details and contact

The HLS-EU Project was co-financed from the EU Public Health Programme 2003-2008, grant 2007-113. It took place from 1 January 2009 – 29 February 2012.

The total costs were approximately 1.1 million Euros, and 40% was co-funded by the European Commission.

The HLS-EU consortium was lead by Maastricht University/CAPHRI. For more information please contact the HLS-EU project coordinator: Kristine Sørensen: K.Sorensen@maastrichtuniversity.nl or link to www.health-literacy.eu

Sørensen K. et al. 2012. "Health literacy and public health: A systematic review and integration of definitions and models." BMC Public Health 12(1):80. (<http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/12/80>)