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## **Is there a Relationship between Health Literacy and Health Disparities?**

### **What are health disparities?**

Health disparities are differences that exist among specific population groups in the United States related to the incidence, prevalence, and mortality of disease, the burden of cancer, and related adverse health conditions. Disparities can occur by gender, age, ethnicity, education, income, social class, disability, geographic location, or sexual orientation<sup>1</sup>.

*National Healthcare Disparities Report* in 2006 reported key findings among disparities in nearly all areas of health care:

- Quality of care: effectiveness, timeliness, patient-centeredness and patient safety
- Access to care
- Health care settings: primary care, home health care, hospital, hospice
- Clinical conditions<sup>2</sup>

### **Top 5 Racial Health Disparities in Missouri**

- Compared to Whites, Black Missourians:
  - Were three times more likely to visit the ER for a diabetes-related incident and have a preventable hospitalization
  - Were twice as likely to die from diabetes
  - Were eight times more likely to be treated in the ER for asthma complications
  - Were four times more likely to have an asthma-related preventable hospitalization
  - Were three hundred percent more likely to be treated in the ER for an infection
  - Were six times more likely to have a preventable hospitalization for congestive heart failure and nine times more likely for hypertension
  - Experienced 50% more fetal deaths<sup>3</sup>

### **Cancer Disparities**

- Death rates for all types of cancer are highest among Blacks for both men and women
- Access to health care is a problem for American Indians and Alaska Natives, who are second only to Hispanics in lacking health insurance
- Liver cancer in Asian Americans are 1.7 to 11.3 times higher than rates among Whites
- Only 38% of Latina women age 40 and older have regular screening mammograms, a simple procedure that can detect breast cancer at its earliest stage, before clinical symptoms develop<sup>4</sup>

### **Health Literacy**

- Reasons for limited literacy
  - Lack of educational opportunities
  - Learning disabilities
  - Cognitive decline in older adults<sup>5</sup>

- Literacy levels impact understanding of:
  - Health information & services
  - Health status
  - Access to care
  
- Researchers know literacy levels affect:
  - Income
  - Occupation
  - Housing
  - Access to medical services<sup>5</sup>
  
- Latinos often have low literacy in both English and Spanish<sup>6</sup>

### **Disparities in Health Literacy**

- Low health literacy affects nearly 90 million Americans or over a third (36%) of the general public.
- Minorities are disproportionately affected. While only 15% of whites were estimated to have low health literacy:<sup>6</sup>
  - just under half (48% ) of American Indians and Alaskan Natives,
  - over half (54%) of Blacks, and
  - two thirds (66% ) of Latinos were estimated to have low health literacy.

### **Health literacy as a predictor of health status**

- Blacks self-report a lower health status than Whites; when adjusted for literacy levels, health literacy levels accounted for up to 40% of the difference
- Poor health literacy is a more effective predictor of a person's health than age, income, employment status, education level and race<sup>4</sup>
- Maternal health literacy is a significant concern because pregnancy may be the initial encounter a woman has with the health care system<sup>7</sup>
- Limited health literacy played a role in the relationship between race and HIV-medication adherence<sup>8</sup>

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