

Short Summary
Health Literacy Survey Germany
Comparison of Results
Between 2014 and 2020

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The German report can be accessed here:

Hurrelmann, K., Klinger, J., Schaeffer, D. (2020): Gesundheitskompetenz der Bevölkerung in Deutschland – Vergleich der Erhebungen 2014 und 2020. Bielefeld: Interdisziplinäres Zentrum für Gesundheitskompetenzforschung (IZGK), Universität Bielefeld.

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Health Literacy Survey Germany Comparison of Results Between 2014 and 2020

In August 2014, the first population-based health literacy survey in Germany “Health Literacy Survey Germany (HLS-GER 1)” was carried out as a cross-sectional representative study (Schaeffer et al. 2016). Within this survey health literacy was measured by the German-language version of the HLS-EU-Q47, which has been tested throughout Europe (Sørensen et al. 2012). The questionnaire consists of 47 questions and is a self-report measure, assessing the degree of difficulty in dealing with health-related information in the areas of health care, disease prevention, and health promotion.

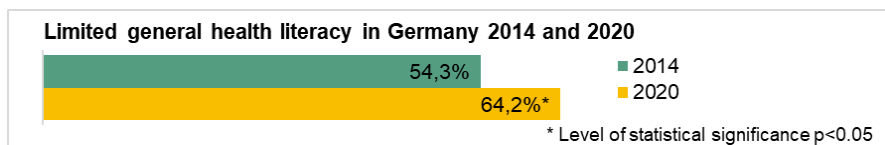
The 2014 health literacy survey represents a milestone in Germany-based health literacy research and has since then not only enabled a plethora of new research across various populations and settings, but paved the way for several health literacy policies in Germany, such as the German National Action Plan on Health Literacy (Schaeffer et al. 2018) and the German Alliance Health Literacy, initiated by the German Ministry of Health in 2017.

In August 2020, the follow-up survey to HLS-GER 1 was conducted in order to showcase changes in population health literacy in the past six years and to take a deeper look into citizens’ health literacy capacities to address health issues. In order to ensure comparability with HLS-GER 1 survey, the 2020 follow-up survey used the same methodology as has been in 2014. The new data allows insights into changes in population health literacy in Germany over time and the possibility to reflect about the needed action to address health literacy in society.

Most of the German population have difficulties in dealing with health information

The findings of both studies show that the majority of the population faces great difficulties in dealing with health-related information. One of the key findings of the 2014 survey was that 54.3% of the population had limited health literacy, i.e. people report to have considerable difficulties in processing health-related information across all health literacy action areas (finding, understanding, appraising, and applying health information). By that time, this was a landslide result that attracted public and policy attention and triggered numerous further studies.

Over the past six years, there has been a further deterioration in the population's health literacy.

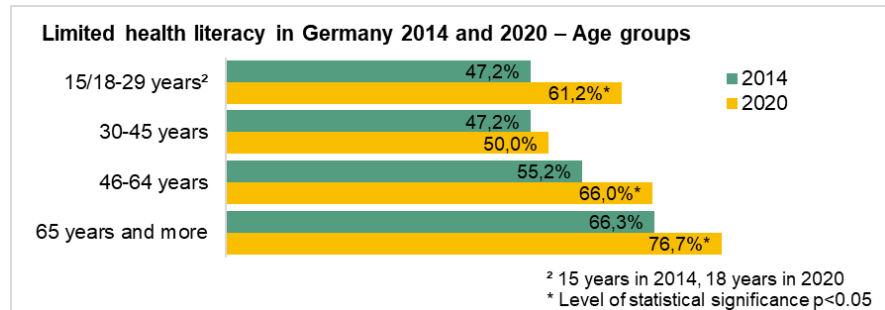


Compared to the 2014 results, in 2020 respondents report to have even more difficulties when dealing with and processing health and illness information. The 2020 survey data shows an increase of 10% of people with limited health literacy, meaning that 64.2% of the population have limited health literacy. This is an alarming result as it indicates that population health literacy in Germany has worsened significantly in the past six years.

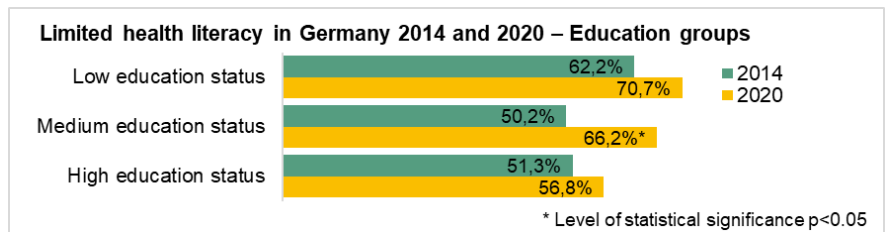
Some groups are more vulnerable for having low levels of health literacy

The patterns of health literacy and associated challenges across population groups have changed little over time, as shown in the below key findings. However, some interesting nuances can be discerned:

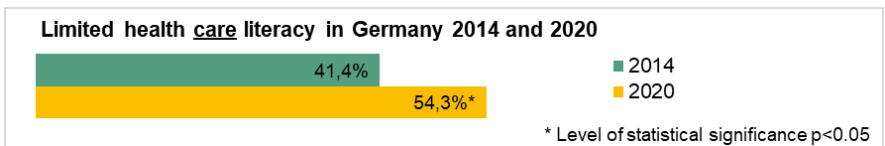
- Across age groups, health literacy has worsened over the past six years; older age groups stand out as having particularly low levels of health literacy. In contrast to the 2014 survey, however, the younger age groups performed significantly worse in 2020.



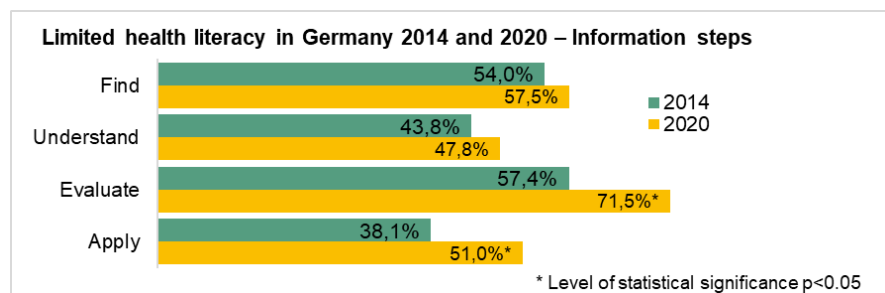
- The social gradient identified in the 2014 survey remains and even increased: The correlation between the level of education and the level of health literacy has become stronger over time. There is a similar correlation between social status and health literacy.



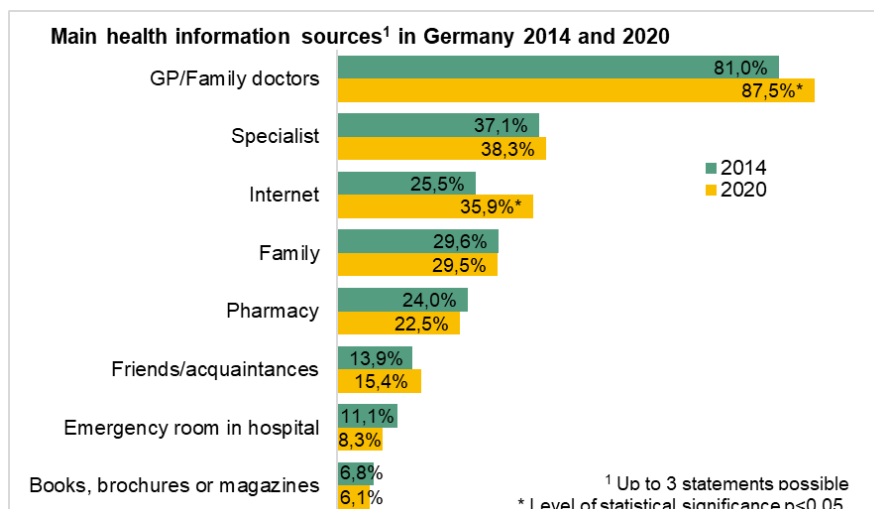
- With regard to health-related areas of activity, it is noticeable that coping with illness and looking for appropriate care is considered to be even more difficult in 2020 than it was in 2014. This is most likely related to a healthcare system that has become more complex and unmanageable.



- Respondents have severe difficulties evaluating and applying information on health issues in the media. While this problem is not new, in 2020 people find it even more difficult to assess the trustworthiness of media health information and derive consequences for their own behavior than they did in 2014. This result is probably associated to the fact that both accurate and inaccurate information on health has significantly increased by the means of the Internet and via online channels, such as social media, forums, and messengers.

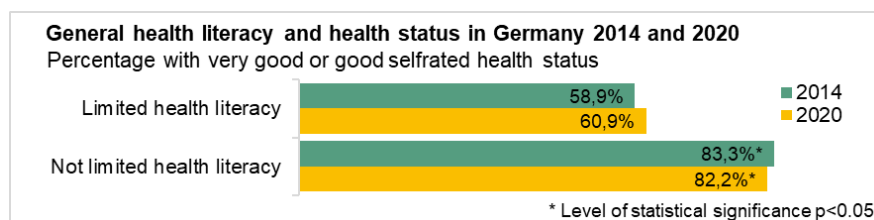


- There have been shifts in ranking the personal relevance of information sources. Family doctors and specialists are even more clearly at the top in 2020 than they were in 2014. However, there has been a noticeable increase in the importance of the Internet, which is becoming particularly important for people with one or more chronic illnesses.



The detrimental consequences of low health literacy

The negative consequences of low health literacy for individual health outcome remain unchanged between both measurements.



For example, people with low health literacy have poorer self-assessed health, exercise less and are more often physically inactive, and have an unhealthier diet than respondents with higher levels of health literacy. On average, people with low health literacy also use the health care system more often than people with higher levels of health literacy.

The findings of the 2020 HLS-GER 1 survey indicate that the increase in the overall low levels of population health literacy in Germany is mainly associated with

- the overabundance of oftentimes complex health information and the lack of user-friendly information sources and environments and
- the complex infrastructure related to the provision of health information, which makes it difficult for people to find, understand, evaluate, and apply health information in everyday life.

The expansion of digital sources providing health-related information has significantly increased over the past years. Numerous platforms provide an enormous amount of knowledge, but according to large proportions of the respondents, they find it difficult to access and use and they are also considered to be less trustworthy. Therefore, people find it more difficult to identify the accurate information and professional help.

The COVID-19 pandemic played a part in this – at least in 2020 – as it has significantly contributed to the increased availability of health information especially on the Internet and has thereby increased the complexity of the given information environments that people have to deal with. This phenomenon is known as ‘infodemic’, which is short for ‘information epidemic’, and is a matter of research in another health literacy study that is currently being conducted at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Health Literacy Research at Bielefeld University (Okan et al. i.E.; HLS-COVID-19).

The results of both waves of HLS-GER 1 in 2014 and in 2020 as well as HLS-COVID-19 together highlight that developing and strengthening health literacy in populations and creating user-friendly health care services and information environments have to be considered critical public health targets.

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