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Digital Health Literacy: A Cornerstone of Health Equity in the EU

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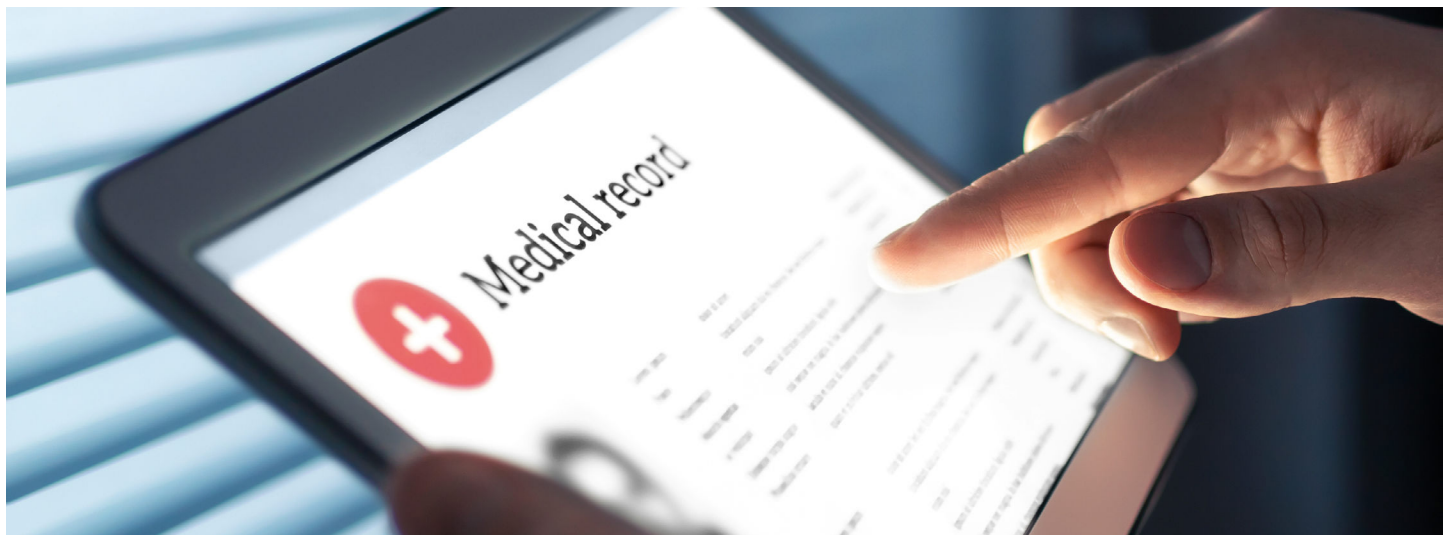
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DIGITAL HEALTH LITERACY: A CORNERSTONE OF HEALTH EQUITY IN THE EU



INTRODUCTION

As the European Union (EU) moves towards greater digitalisation, ensuring high levels of digital health literacy amongst individuals is essential for equitable access to healthcare. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined [digital health literacy](#) as “the ability to search, find, understand and evaluate health information from electronic resources and to use the knowledge gained to solve health-related problems”. People already vary widely in their ability to manage their health and healthcare, a concept known as health literacy. Digital health literacy introduces an additional dimension: the ability to navigate digital environments, which is increasingly required for accessing healthcare.

The ability to practice digital health literacy may appear to be solely a matter of personal skill, but in fact, it is rooted in social and contextual factors. Digital health literacy goes far beyond the crucial components of digital skills and knowledge of the healthcare system. It depends on a myriad of other aspects that influence [meaningful digital](#)

[connectivity](#), as defined by the United Nations. These include access to devices, affordability, accessibility of information, network availability and quality, and infrastructure and network security.

Digital tools have become more prevalent in healthcare, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples are remote consultations, online access to electronic health records, and telemonitoring of patients at home. As a result, there is a growing risk that individuals who currently have low digital health literacy will experience difficulty in accessing and using healthcare services, thereby exacerbating existing health inequities ([EuroHealthNet, 2019](#)). In this sense, digital health literacy is increasingly recognised as a [social determinant of health](#).

In this policy brief, we first outline the importance of digital health literacy in the EU and any current challenges. Second, we make key recommendations to ensure that everyone can benefit equally from healthcare services.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL HEALTH LITERACY

- Digital health literacy [empowers individuals](#) to make informed decisions about their health, from accessing medical information to utilising digital health tools such as health apps. High levels of health literacy are associated with [better health outcomes](#), such as improved management of diseases, increased participation in public health measures, and reduced healthcare costs. Enhancing digital health literacy can help to bridge the gap in healthcare access between different socio-economic groups and [reduce health inequities](#).
- [72% of EU citizens](#) use the internet to look for health information. However, many EU citizens (between 22% and 58% of the population) express difficulties in accessing, understanding, appraising, and applying information they need to navigate healthcare services ([WHO M-POHL 2019](#)).
- At the same time, the 2023 WHO [Report on Digital Health](#) in the European Region shows that only 14 of the 27 EU Member States have developed policies for digital health literacy. Indeed at the EU level, there is currently no coordinated strategy to address digital health literacy.
- There is a [digital divide](#): a large difference in access to and ability to use digital technologies, particularly among older adults, people with low socio-economic status, racial/ethnic minority groups, and those living in rural areas. The digital divide between younger and older populations in using new technologies is growing because of [disparities in digital literacy](#).

- The recent EU Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act acknowledges the importance of a sufficient level of AI literacy¹ for those employing AI systems and people affected by the outcomes of its use. It poses an [obligation on providers](#) and deployers – including healthcare professionals – to take measures to increase the AI literacy of their staff. This includes technical education and training, with specific consideration for the context in which the system is used, such as healthcare. However, the European Commission has yet to issue guidelines on how to implement these measures.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a Comprehensive EU Digital Health Literacy Strategy

The European Commission should develop a comprehensive digital health literacy strategy that aligns with other digital and health policies, such as the EU4Health Programme and the Digital Education Action Plan. This strategy should include clear objectives, measurable targets, and a roadmap for implementation across Member States.

2. Promote Inclusive Digital Health Literacy Education

Invest in education and training programmes that are accessible to all citizens, with a particular focus on key groups that currently experience low digital or health literacy levels, including older adults, low-income populations, and rural communities. Encourage Member States to integrate digital health literacy into school curricula, vocational training, and lifelong learning programmes.

1. In the AI Act, 'AI literacy' is defined as: skills, knowledge and understanding that allow providers, deployers and affected persons, taking into account their respective rights and obligations in the context of this Regulation, to make an informed deployment of AI systems, as well as to gain awareness about the opportunities and risks of AI and possible harm it can cause.

3. Enhance Access to Digital Health Tools and Resources

Ensure that digital health tools and platforms are user-friendly and accessible to people with varying degrees of digital literacy and accessibility needs. This includes promoting the development and dissemination of multilingual and culturally appropriate digital health resources to cater for the EU's diverse population. To realise inclusiveness of key populations, it is of utmost importance to involve members of such groups across all design, development and implementation stages.

4. Strengthen Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Encourage collaboration between governments, healthcare providers, tech companies and civil society to develop effective solutions for improving digital health literacy. This should include support to initiatives that focus on creating accessible digital health technologies and those that provide digital literacy training to underserved communities.

5. Monitor and Evaluate Digital Health Literacy Initiatives

Establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating digital health literacy initiatives across the EU to ensure they are effective and reach the intended populations.

6. Safeguard Offline Access to Healthcare

To abide by the Right to Health, governments must ensure that people who are unable—or unwilling—to use digital healthcare options have unabated access to high-quality healthcare.

CONCLUSION

Digital health literacy is essential for ensuring that all individuals in the EU can understand and benefit from digital healthcare innovations. Beyond digital health literacy, it is imperative that the EU commits to the comprehensive regulation of digital health tools to ensure their safety, trustworthiness and benefit to patients. By addressing the current challenges and implementing these recommendations, the EU can promote health equity, improve health outcomes, and empower people to take control of their health in the digital age. We urge the European Commission, Member States, and relevant stakeholders to prioritise digital health literacy.

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