COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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Council of Europe High-Level Conference on Health Literacy and Human Rights 4 December 2026 – Rome, Italy

Concept Note

Introduction

Health protection is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democracy and social justice across Europe. It is not merely a policy objective, but a shared societal responsibility requiring sustained political commitment at all levels of governance, cross-sectoral co-operation, and innovative, rights-based approaches.

The Council of Europe has consistently placed the right to the protection of health at the centre of its mandate, supported by a strong normative framework, including the European Social Charter, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (Oviedo Convention), alongside complementary instruments such as the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law.

However, the realisation of health protection depends not only on legal guarantees, but also on individuals' ability to effectively exercise their rights in health-related contexts. This includes the capacity to access, understand, appraise, and use health information and services. Achieving this requires action at multiple levels: individual, organisational (health professionals), and systemic (health systems, institutions and service providers).

In this context, health literacy emerges as a critical enabler which, according to the Council of Europe Guide to Health Literacy, refers to people's knowledge, motivation, and competencies to access, understand, appraise, and apply health information in order to make judgments and make decisions in everyday life concerning healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion for themselves and those around them.

It is not merely an individual competence, but a systemic lever for improving health outcomes and strengthening societal well-being. It plays a particularly important role for individuals at risk of discrimination, marginalisation or exclusion - including older persons, migrants, persons with disabilities, LGBTI individuals, Roma communities, young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods and people experiencing homelessness - empowering them to act as informed rights-holders and active participants in their care.

Conversely, limited health literacy constitutes a structural barrier that undermines health prevention and restricts access to health care, exacerbates inequalities, including gender inequalities, reinforces stigma and discrimination, and generates avoidable costs for health systems and the society as a whole. In this sense, low health literacy acts as a "choke point" in the realisation of human rights.

As reaffirmed at the Council of Europe Conference on the Protection of Health (Strasbourg, 15 October 2025), strengthening health literacy is both a prerequisite for effective health protection and a key driver of democratic resilience, social cohesion, and crisis preparedness.
Against this backdrop, the High-Level Conference will explore how to strengthen health literacy in enabling the effective exercise of human rights, advancing public health and reinforcing democratic stability.

Objectives

- Reaffirm the Council of Europe's core values and standards in the field of health and human rights
- Encourage member states to join and actively contribute to the Coalition for Health Literacy and Human Rights
- Promote international, multi-level and intersectoral co-operation on health literacy
- Identify concrete avenues for action to ensure that health literacy is accessible to all

Target Audience

- Ministers of member states (responsible for health, human rights, social affairs, social inclusion, equality, education, family, youth, sport, research and innovation)
- High-level representatives of member and observer states
- Parliamentarians and local and regional authorities
- Representatives of international organisations (e.g. WHO, EU, OECD)
- National Human Rights Institutions and Equality Bodies
- Academia and research institutions
- Youth representatives
- Civil society
- Health and legal professionals
- Media and the general public

Expected Results

- Adoption of a **Declaration on Health Literacy and Human Rights, *the Rome Declaration***
- Increased number of States joining the Coalition for Health Literacy and Human Rights
- Development of a roadmap for intersectoral, multilevel co-operation within and beyond the Council ofEurope

Format

- 1 day event
- Interpretation in English, French, Italian
- Cultural welcome event the evening
- Programme:
    - Institutional opening session
    - 3 thematic sessions (see below) and 1 concluding session on the way forward and adoption of the Rome Declaration on Health Literacy and Human Rights
    - A dedicated signature type moment for formal joining the Coalition for Health Literacy and Human Rights
- Open to press at opening and closing

Thematic Pillars

1. Health Literacy as a Pillar of Democratic Resilience and Trust

Health literacy strengthens democratic governance by enhancing trust, participation, and accountability. It reinforces the relationship between individuals and institutions, enabling meaningful engagement in health-related decision-making.

Where health literacy is weak, disinformation and misinformation, distrust, and perceived inequalities can fuel polarisation and undermine democratic stability.

Consequences of limited health literacy for democratic resilience include:

- Increased vulnerability to misinformation and disinformation
- Growing distrust and perceived inequalities
- Risks of social polarisation and weakened democratic stability

Conversely, strengthened health literacy is essential for promoting equality, inclusion, transparency, and social cohesion, which thereby enables:

- Trust building in, and accountability of, public services and institutions
- More inclusive health-related decision-making
- Improved transparency and social cohesion between people and institutions

2. Health Literacy as a Determinant of Public Health

Health literacy is a key determinant of population health outcomes. Nearly half of Europe's population faces challenges in understanding and navigating health information and services.

Consequences include:

- Poor adherence to treatment
- Preventable illnesses
- Increased mortality
- Higher use of emergency services
- Significant economic burden on health systems

Low health literacy is estimated to account for 3–5% of healthcare expenditure, with individuals with limited health literacy costing significantly more to health systems.

Conversely, higher levels of health literacy contribute to:

- Greater resilience to health crises
- Improved vaccination uptake
- Improved physical as well as mental health and well-being
- Reduced health inequalities
- Enhanced preparedness and risk awareness

3. Health literacy to enable the exercise of health rights and equality in healthcare

Health literacy is essential for the effective realisation of the right to health protection without discrimination. It empowers individuals to access services, make informed decisions, and navigate health systems. It also helps overcome barriers such as language, accessibility, and systemic discrimination.

A rights-based approach to health literacy means empowering individuals but also ensuring that institutions are responsive to people's health literacy needs. Without adequate health literacy, the right to health protection risks remaining theoretical rather than practical and accessible, particularly for individuals at risk of discrimination, marginalisation or exclusion.

Consequences of low health literacy includes:

- Exacerbated health inequalities
- Increased stigma and discrimination
- Increased risk of exclusion from essential health services
- Limited access to health care for groups at risk of discrimination, marginalisation or exclusion

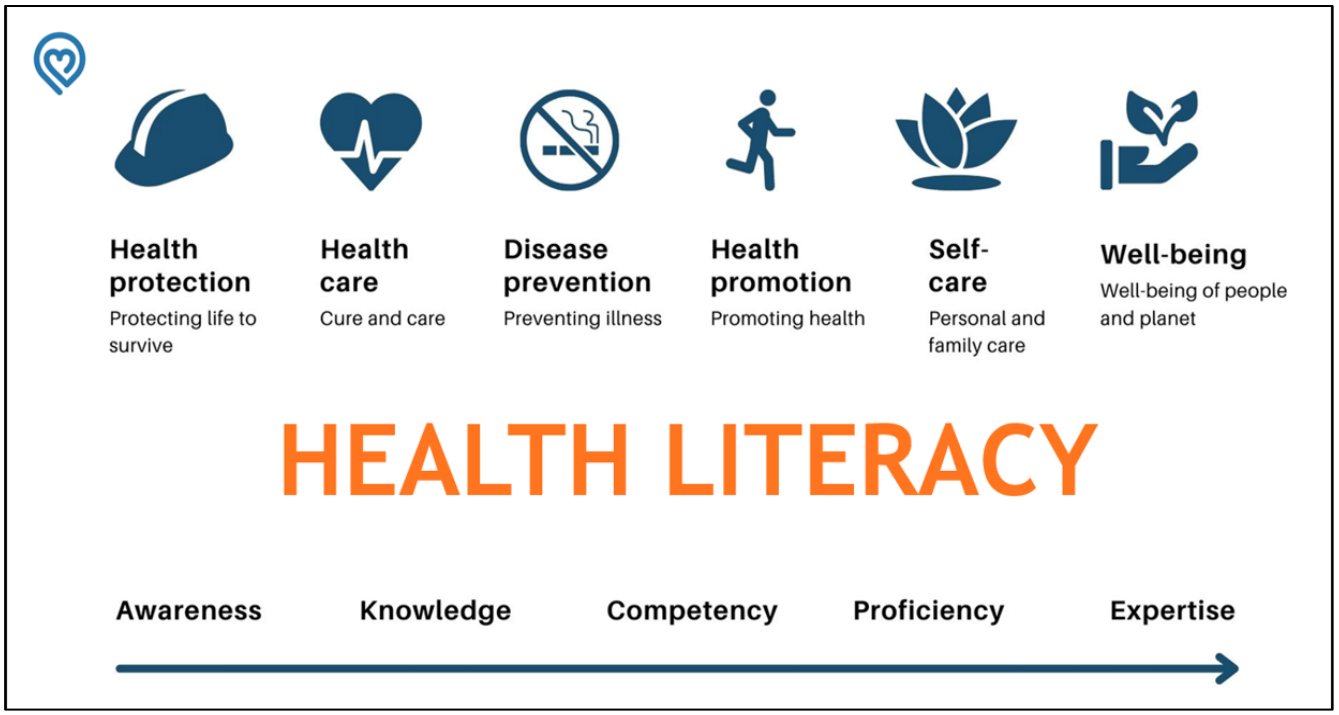
Conversely, strengthened health literacy contributes to:

- Empowerment of individuals to access services, make informed decisions, and navigate health systems
- Enhanced ability to overcome language, accessibility and discrimination barriers
- More practical and accessible health rights
- Increased participation and agency

4. Moving Forward: From Commitment to Action

The Council of Europe is advancing health literacy and human rights through a range of initiatives, including:

- The promotion of the **Council of Europe Guide to Health Literacy**
- The **Coalition for Health Literacy and Human Rights** (launched in March 2026), providing a platform for co-operation and exchange among member states
- A dedicated co-operation project (with the support of Italy) to develop practical tools, foster cross-border knowledge sharing, and strengthen capacities of policymakers and practitioners
- The adoption of a **Declaration on Health Literacy and Human Rights** at the Conference, reaffirming commitments at all levels of governance with particular attention to individuals and groups at risk of discrimination, marginalisation or exclusion.


Health protection
Protecting life to survive
Health care
Cure and care
Disease prevention
Preventing illness
Health promotion
Promoting health
Self-care
Personal and family care
Well-being
Well-being of people and planet
HEALTH LITERACY
Awareness
Knowledge
Competency
Proficiency
Expertise