



Health Services Vocational Collage

The Importance of Health Literacy in Pregnancy

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Abstract

Health promotion, defined as a process that enables individuals to increase their control over the factors affecting their health in order to improve their health, focuses on changing the social, environmental and economic conditions that affect the health of individuals and society. Therefore, increasing the level of health literacy is the key approach to achieve all these. Especially in individuals and societies with low level of health literacy, pregnancy process significantly affects mother-child health. For this reason, attempts to increase health literacy during pregnancy will positively affect the health of mother and baby.

Keywords: Health Literacy, Pregnancy, Maternal-Infant Health

Introduction

In today's world where technology is advancing rapidly, the need for health literacy skills is increasing in obstetric fields including reproductive and sexual health, pregnancy, birth and postnatal services (Yılmaz & Tiraki, 2016; Dongarwar & Salihu, 2019; Filiz & Bodur, 2022).

It is very important to develop health literacy skills in order to achieve the desired change and development in maternal-child health indicators, which is one of the most important parameters when measuring the development level of a society (Kutlu & Akbulut, 2019). In the literature, it is stated that pregnant women with a low level of health literacy are insufficient in terms of health-seeking behaviors, perceptions of their pregnancy, and interpretation of possible danger signs (Durmuş & Ören, 2022).

The health of women and children is of great importance in the formation of a healthy family, healthy society and a healthy generation. Within the scope of protecting and improving health, the level of health literacy of pregnant women is very important for mother and baby in managing this process (Şimşek, 2013).

Protection and improvement of health during pregnancy can be achieved by supporting health literacy.

The Concept of Health Literacy

The concept of health literacy was first defined in the study of "health literacy as social policy" in 1974 (Simonds, 1974).

"Accessing and understanding health information for the health of the individual and developing behavior in

accordance with this information" This was defined by Nutbeam and Wise in 1993 with an emphasis on information access, meaning and behaviour and the basis of today's definitions was established (Kickbusch et al., 2013). After these developments, in the "Health Promotion Dictionary" prepared by Nutbeam on behalf of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1998, health literacy was defined as an individual's ability to access, understand and use health information for the protection and maintenance of health. (Nutbeam, 2000).

Nutbeam developed a 3-level model in 2000 and classified health literacy as functional health literacy, interactive health literacy, and critical health literacy (Nutbeam, 2000).

1- Basic/Functional health literacy: It includes basic literacy skills and knowledge about health status and health systems, which are the desired outcomes of traditional health education initiatives.

2- Communicative/Interactive health literacy: It includes using different types of communication, accessing new information in changing conditions, and more cognitive gains and social skills.

3- Critical/Critical health literacy: It includes advanced cognitive and social skills used in critical analysis of health-related information and in making health decisions (Nutbeam, 2000).

The Importance of Health Literacy

Health literacy plays an important role in maintaining health. The concept of a healthy lifestyle, which has a positive relationship with health literacy, has an important contribution to the protection of health. As health literacy increases,

individuals, tendencies towards stress avoidance, physical activities, balanced nutrition increase (Tözün & Sözmen, 2015; Doğan & Çetinkaya, 2019; Madalı, 2017).

Health literacy is also an important factor in public health, it ensures the elimination of health inequalities, increases people's healthy life span and improves their quality of life (Yılmazel & Çetinkaya, 2020; Akpolat et al., 2020). It has been determined that people with low health literacy are more likely to have poor health status, and have a higher risk of hospitalization as a result of problems in continuing the treatment due to not understanding the treatment (Berkman et al., 2011). These situations increase the average annual health care costs by four times the total population (Berkman et al., 2011). The level of health literacy is important in terms of affecting a large number of people, negative health outcomes, management of chronic diseases, cost and equity (Jeong & Kim, 2016). All these processes have revealed the importance of health literacy (Yılmaz & Tiraki, 2016; Yılmazel & Çetinkaya, 2020).

In a study conducted throughout Turkey, insufficient health literacy was found to be 24.5%, problematic-limited health literacy 40.1%, adequate health literacy 27.8%, and excellent health literacy 7.6% (Tanrıöver et al., 2014).

When the literature is examined, the frequency of those with low health literacy is 35.3% in women, while this rate is 26.4% in men. It is thought that health literacy, which has an important role in pregnancy process, will be an important risk factor for mother and baby. According to the study of Okyay et

al., 69.4% of the society has a problematic or insufficient level of health literacy (Okyay & Abacıgil, 2016).

Health Literacy of Pregnant Women

Pregnancy is the period when women most frequently need and benefit from health services. The level of health literacy of women affects not only their own health care, but also newborn and child health (Berkman et al., 2011; Solhi et al., 2019). During this period, the level of health literacy of pregnant women is an important factor in recognizing health problems, applying to a health institution, and adapting to treatment and follow-up (Corrarino, 2013).

The prenatal period is the period in which physiological changes begin in pregnant women and are prepared for motherhood. During this period, pregnant women try to adapt to physiological changes (Şahin & Yurdakul., 2012). The prenatal period is not just a developmental time when the fetus grows and develops. The fetus exhibits a range of behaviors and reactions to its environment, including its ability to learn (Hepper, 2015). Experiences in the prenatal period significantly affect development in the long run. During pregnancy, the woman is prepared during the postpartum period (Taheri et al., 2020). Maternal health literacy is the key to achieving a healthy pregnancy (Taheri et al., 2020). It was found that as the health literacy level of the mothers increased, the level of breastfeeding self-efficacy also increased. In this direction, determining and increasing the health literacy level of women in the preconceptional period and from the pregnancy period will

enable them to reach the right place, at the right time, in the right way, in the acquisition of health protection behaviors such as breastfeeding (Aydin & Aba, 2019).

When the literature is examined in a study conducted, 18.3% of pregnant women have insufficient health literacy, 45.2% have problematic-limited and 36.5% have sufficient level of health literacy (Pirdehghan et al., 2020). As the education level of women increases, the health literacy of pregnant women also increases (Shi et al., 2020; Dadipoor et al., 2017). In another study, health literacy of pregnant women regarding sexuality, rational drug use and harmful behaviors was insufficient (Durmuş & Besey, 2022). Therefore, there are problems during pregnancy. In this respect, it is extremely important for pregnant women to understand the importance of health services provided in the antenatal period and fulfill their requirements. Understanding the importance of health services provided in the antenatal period by pregnant women leads to increased recommendations/treatments, willingness to follow-up/adherence to treatment, and to make healthier decisions. In some studies, it has been reported that, pregnant women with low health literacy levels do not have sufficient and regular pregnancy follow-ups, do not have their first follow-up on time, do not know the tests such as double-triple screening tests, sugar overload, and also such as preterm birth, miscarriage, premature birth of a low birth weight baby and stillbirth negative pregnancy outcomes are more common (Endres et al., 2004; Shieh, 2009).

Women should be supported in terms of education, health literacy levels should be considered while planning health services and trainings for pregnant women, and it has been seen that it is important to include these issues in trainings.

Improving Health Literacy in Pregnancy

It has been determined that there is a significant relationship between having a healthy pregnancy process and receiving prenatal education. Therefore, raising the health literacy level of pregnant women is directly effective in improving women's health (Yıldırım & Keser, 2015). Having a sufficient level of health literacy allows pregnant women to realize the signs of danger during pregnancy, to increase self-care and self-confidence during pregnancy, to receive quality prenatal care, to be aware of the recommendations offered by health professionals, to support the autonomy of the pregnant woman and to have a healthy and safe prenatal period (Mojoyinola, 2011).

Efforts should be made to increase women's health literacy skills, pregnant women should be made aware of health literacy in childbirth preparation classes/pregnant school, and it should contribute to the development of their ability to make decisions about their own health (Vamos et al., 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This period can be seen as an opportunity to increase the level of health literacy, as the pregnancy period is a period when women benefit most from health services and are open to learning about health-related knowledge and behaviors. In

order to increase the health literacy levels of pregnant women, training and awareness raising can be provided on how to access reliable health information in childbirth preparation classes or antenatal checkups.

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