A national survey of adult basic educators was designed to explore practitioners’ perceptions about and experiences with health issues and topics in adult basic education classes. Between March and April 1998 a total of 1,621 surveys were mailed to directors of adult education programs in 25 states, distributed among the four regions of the United States as used by the National Institute For Literacy (NIFL). Of the 1,621 surveys sent out, 636 were returned, yielding a response rate of 39%. Surveys were in approximately equal proportions in three regions of the United States: 34% in the Northeast, 36% in the South, and 34% in the West; however, the Midwest exhibited the highest return rate at 48%. Teachers from a variety of locales were well represented: 41% (256) reported teaching in a rural setting; 35% (217) in an urban locale, and 23% (145) taught in a suburban setting.

The vast majority of participating teachers (93%) viewed the adult learning setting as an appropriate setting to teach and learn about health. Nutrition led the top of the list as the most common health topic area to have been discussed in class. Teachers who had included health units viewed health lessons as enhancing skills in the areas of dialogue and discussion, vocabulary building, reading, language development, and in critical thinking. These educators also viewed health as having an advantage, relative to other topic areas, in terms of contributing to learner interest, participation, and motivation. Overall, the educators who had taught health gave high ratings on the scale that assessed the value of health as a content area to support curriculum goals.

Teachers’ definitions of health literacy tended to focus on health information. However, the idea of functional health literacy is gaining greater attention in the public health arena. Health literacy may be defined as the ability to use written materials to function in health care settings and to maintain one’s health and the skills needed to advocate for and request needed clarification.

Health educators need to collaborate with adult educators to enlarge the concept of functional health literacy and to include more emphasis on skills to promote effective medical communication (including dealing with informed consent), access to health services, and patient advocacy. Adult educators with experience in teaching health units need to collaborate with
public health and medical professionals to develop curricula to foster functional health literacy with methodology that educators successfully apply to build basic skills.