

# Empowering digital health literacy



## What is digital health literacy?

**Digital Health Literacy** is the ability to find, understand, and use health information from digital sources like the internet or apps. It involves basic computer skills and the ability to evaluate information for accuracy and relevance. This skill is essential for making informed health decisions in an increasingly digital world<sup>1</sup>.



## The challenge<sup>2</sup>

- **33% of the population aged 15 years and over** has a low level of health literacy.
- **40% of Belgians** are digitally vulnerable, limiting their healthcare access.
- **32% lack digital skills**, making it harder to use online health services.
- **8% don't use the internet**, excluding them from digital healthcare benefits.

Improving digital health literacy ensures better healthcare access, informed decision-making, and patient empowerment.

## How to improve digital health literacy<sup>3</sup>



### ***Raise awareness and encourage use***

- › Make sure people **know about available digital tools** (through ambassadors and digital help desks).
- › **Boost engagement** by highlighting the benefits for citizens and relevant tailored messaging.
- › **GPs/ healthcare workers as key promoters** of digital health tools to drive patient adoption.



### ***Make digital health easy and accessible***

- › **Keep it simple:** Use clear language and avoid jargon.
- › **Provide multichannel support** - users can get help online, by phone, or in-person.
- › **Ensure mobile compatibility** since most users rely on smartphones.
- › **Co-create with users** - develop and refine tools based on user feedback.



### ***Build trust and confidence***

- › **Be transparent** by showing how health data is used and protected.
- › **Allow persons to adjust data access** with **flexible privacy settings** (dynamic consent).
- › **Prioritize human interaction** - digital tools should support, not replace, personal care.



### ***Provide support and training***

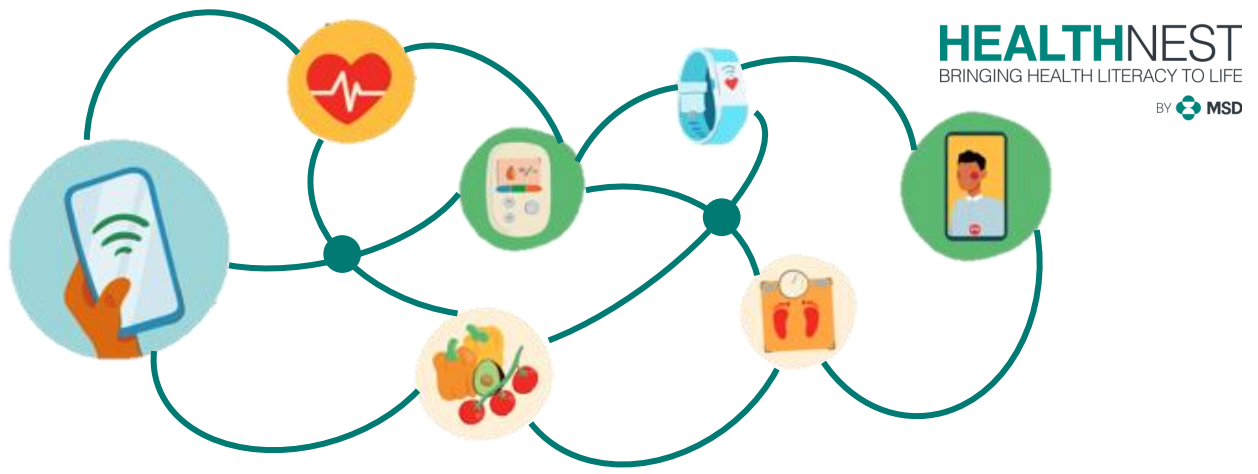
- › **Equip healthcare workers** with digital literacy skills and tools to guide citizens if needed.
- › **Make training materials accessible** - provide them in multiple formats (video, text, audio) and languages.
- › **Offer a testing environment** where users can practice using digital health tools.



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**HEALTHNEST**  
BRINGING HEALTH LITERACY TO LIFE

BY  **MSD**

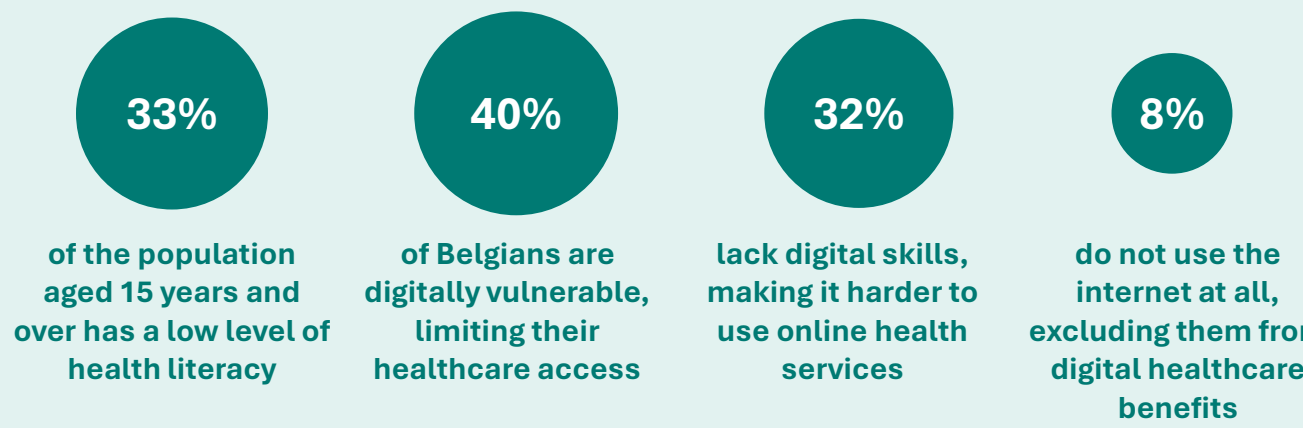


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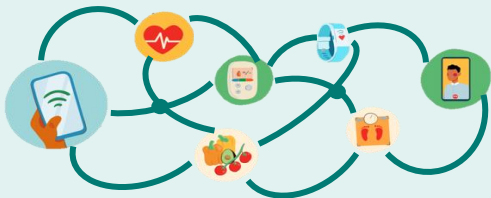
Digital health technologies are transforming healthcare systems across the world, including in Belgium. From e-prescriptions and mobile health apps to teleconsultations and personal health records, these tools offer the potential for more accessible, efficient, and personalized care. But while digital solutions are expanding rapidly, not everyone is able to benefit from them equally.

A growing divide exists between those who can navigate digital health confidently and those who cannot. This divide is not just about access to devices or the internet—it’s also about skills, confidence, trust, and usability. These elements form what we call digital health literacy<sup>1</sup> : the **ability to find, understand, and use health information from digital sources** such as the internet or mobile apps. It encompasses basic computer skills and the capability to evaluate information for accuracy and relevance. This skill is essential for making informed health decisions in an increasingly digital world.

Despite the increasing availability of digital health solutions, there are significant challenges<sup>2</sup> in ensuring their effective use...



Improving digital health literacy is crucial to ensuring better healthcare access, informed decision-making, and patient empowerment. Without focused efforts to address these gaps, many individuals will continue to face barriers to optimal healthcare in the digital age.



## Framing the solution...

Improving digital health literacy requires action across the entire health ecosystem. To tailor our recommendations to address this challenge, we’ve grouped the key stakeholders around two types of roles that organizations and professionals may play—recognizing that many actors contribute in multiple ways.

### Those who enable and deliver digital health in practice



These are the people and organizations directly involved in designing, using, or supporting digital health tools in care settings. They shape how tools are embedded in care. This includes:

- › Healthcare professionals and care teams
- › Hospitals, primary care organizations, and mutualities
- › Digital health developers and vendors
- › Educators and training providers

### Those who shape the broader environment for digital health



These are the actors who influence the rules, funding, and systems that determine how digital tools are adopted at scale. This includes:

- › Policymakers and public health authorities
- › Health insurers and regulatory bodies
- › Advocacy organizations and patient groups

## Four strategic pillars for action

We identified four priority areas to strengthen digital health literacy in Belgium.

- 1. Raise awareness and encourage use** – making sure citizens know about digital tools and understand their value
- 2. Make digital health easy and accessible** – simplifying design, language, and access
- 3. Build trust and confidence** – ensuring digital tools are safe and transparent
- 4. Provide support and training** – helping citizens and professionals build the skills to engage meaningfully with digital health

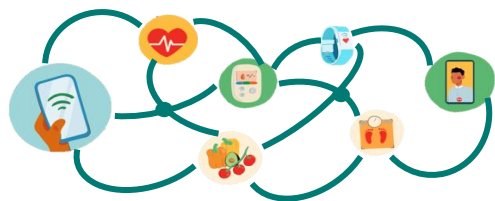
## About this report

This paper is based on the outcomes of a digital health roundtable organized by HealthNest on February 3, 2025. The roundtable brought together key organizations from across the Belgian health and care ecosystem.

The discussion focused on strategies and tools to improve digital health literacy across Belgium. The insights gathered were translated into four strategic pillars. While the perspectives were diverse, there was strong consensus that improving digital health literacy is both urgent and achievable—if responsibility is shared across the ecosystem.

### Organizations present





## Pillar 1 - Raising awareness and encouraging use



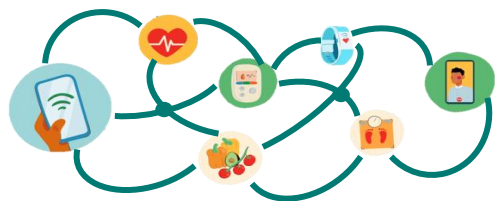
Many people are not aware that digital health tools exist, or they don't see how these tools are relevant to their everyday care. Awareness-building is a critical first step, but it must go beyond general promotion. Effective communication requires personal relevance, trusted messengers, and repeated exposure across different settings.

### Recommendations for enablers and implementers

- Introduce digital health tools during care conversations—such as at the GP practice, pharmacy, or home care visits—and explain how they fit into a person's health journey
- Display visual materials (posters, videos, leaflets) in waiting rooms and reception areas to introduce tools in familiar settings
- Emphasize the personal benefits of digital tools (e.g. shorter wait times, easier access to results, fewer phone calls), rather than technical features
- Collaborate with local ambassadors, including pharmacists, informal caregivers, or community nurses, who can act as trusted guides
- Embed digital tools within care pathways so that patients encounter them at the right moment—for example, after a diagnosis or hospital discharge

### Recommendations for policy shapers and system architects

- Fund campaigns to educate citizens on how to access their health data and inform them about the various health apps and digital tools available for managing their care
- Work with civil society organizations and municipalities to ensure outreach efforts reach vulnerable groups through trusted local networks
- Integrate digital health into health promotion programs and educational campaigns, alongside traditional prevention topics
- Strengthen visibility of national digital health platforms by clearly signposting them from government websites, and mutuality communications



## Pillar 2 - Make digital health easy and accessible



Even when people are aware of digital health tools, they may struggle to use them because of poor design, complex language, or limited access to devices and connectivity. Making digital tools easier to use—and easier to access—is essential to ensure they are truly inclusive and supportive of care.

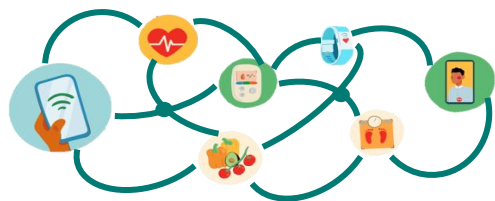
### Recommendations for enablers and implementers

- Use plain, non-technical language to ensure digital tools are understandable for people with different levels of health or digital literacy
- Offer information and support in multiple languages and formats—such as visual guides, audio instructions, or face-to-face assistance—to reflect how people learn differently
- Ensure mobile compatibility, since mobile is often the primary or only way people access the internet, especially in lower-income groups
- Use familiar design patterns, such as icons or layouts inspired by widely used platforms (e.g. messaging apps), to reduce the learning curve
- Involve users from diverse backgrounds in the development and testing process to ensure tools reflect real needs and lived experience


### Recommendations for policy shapers and system architects

- Require all publicly funded digital health tools to meet accessibility standards, covering visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive barriers
- Invest in affordable device access to close the remaining digital divide in Belgium, particularly among lower-income groups
- Promote interoperability between digital health systems, so users don't need to learn multiple platforms for different providers, hospitals, etc.
- Support common design guidelines at the national or regional level to ensure user-friendly experiences across different digital health environments





## Pillar 3 - Building trust and confidence



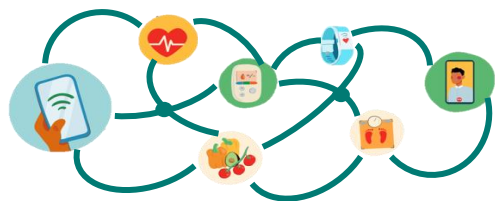
Even when tools are accessible and easy to use, people will hesitate to engage with them if they don't feel safe, respected, or in control. Trust is central to digital health adoption—especially when personal health data is involved. Clear communication, transparent governance, and a continued emphasis on human connection all help to build confidence over time.

### Recommendations for enablers and implementers

- Communicate transparently about how personal data is collected, used, stored, and protected, using clear and simple language
- Provide users with flexible privacy options, allowing them to control what information they share and with whom
- Link digital tools to real people in the care process—for example, by enabling direct communication with a care provider
- Emphasize the credibility of tools by highlighting validation, certification, or endorsement by public health authorities
- Ensure that digital interactions complement, rather than replace, human care—especially for users who prefer personal contact

### Recommendations for policy shapers and system architects

- Support the development of features that make trust tangible—such as showing users when their data has been accessed, or enabling real-time control over privacy settings
- Strengthen legal and ethical frameworks around data governance, ensuring they are well-adapted to evolving digital health models
- Ensure enforcement of GDPR compliance in digital health and increase public understanding of digital rights, consent, and data access
- Monitor trust in digital health tools through regular public surveys and include trust-related indicators in digital health performance evaluations



## Pillar 4 - Provide support and training



Even well-designed digital tools require some level of guidance and confidence to use effectively. Many people hesitate not because they lack interest, but because they fear making mistakes, don't understand where to begin, or don't have anyone to ask. Supporting people to build digital skills is one of the most effective ways to boost adoption.

### Recommendations for enablers and implementers

- Equip healthcare professionals with training so they can confidently introduce digital tools and explain them in a supportive, non-technical way
- Create low-pressure spaces for patients to practice using digital tools—whether through in-clinic help, digital literacy corners, or community-based drop-ins
- Offer support materials in a variety of formats and languages, including simple visual guides, short explainer videos, and help buttons
- Set up peer learning models, such as “digital health buddies” or patient volunteers, who can offer informal coaching and reassurance
- Encourage a culture of normalizing questions and experimentation—helping people feel safe asking for support without stigma or judgment

### Recommendations for policy shapers and system architects

- Fund national and local digital health training initiatives, targeting those most at risk of exclusion. For example, Belgium's Mediawijs and Wallonia's Digital Public Spaces (Espaces publics numériques) provide valuable local infrastructure for digital learning
- Integrate digital competencies into the professional development of all healthcare staff. This includes basic skills, but also how to communicate about digital tools with patients in a clear and empathetic way
- Incentivize healthcare organizations to provide digital training and onboarding as part of care quality efforts
- Partner with civil society organizations to deliver digital health literacy support close to people's homes, using trusted local networks





## Closing words

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Digital health tools have the potential to transform how people engage with care—making services more accessible, proactive, and person-centred. But that potential will only be realized if individuals are empowered to use these tools confidently and meaningfully. Digital health literacy is not a “nice-to-have”—it is a foundational enabler for equitable healthcare in a digital age.

In Belgium, where a significant portion of the population still lacks digital skills or struggles with health information, improving digital health literacy is both urgent and achievable. The four strategic pillars outlined in this paper—raising awareness, making digital health accessible, building trust, and providing support—offer a clear roadmap for action.

Crucially, this is not the responsibility of one actor alone. Healthcare professionals, care organizations, public authorities, insurers, mutuality's, digital developers, and civil society each have a role to play. Digital health literacy must be embedded not only into apps and platforms, but into everyday care, system design, and health policy.

By working across these pillars—and committing to shared, sustained action—we can make sure digital health becomes a tool for inclusion, not a source of inequality.

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