



What determines our health?

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There you are, making all the best choices about your health. You don't smoke, you exercise regularly and eat a

balanced healthy diet, and you avoid high risk behaviours. It is all under control, isn't it? Nope!

As we examine people's health, we are able to make many solid generalizations that hold true across populations. For example, we know that if all children are immunized against polio, the disease can be eradicated. While much of the work of population health is statistical, understanding and acting on the findings is critical. Being able to provide clean water to a village will save lives, even if we cannot identify which one, we know there will be a certain percentage improvement.

Having made all the right decisions, why would illness and disease still strike? Easy: there are other factors at play. Individual characteristics of age, gender and heredity all

influence health. So too do economic and social drivers like income and education. These are the 'determinants of health.' The list of determinants usually includes: income; employment & working conditions; food security; environment & housing; early childhood development; education & literacy; social support systems; health behaviours; and access to health care.

Each of these factors is complex in the way it works to affect us, but each has measurable influence on a population's health. For example, income alone (or combined with other determinants) is a significant

contributor to health. Research shows there is a real difference in the prevalence of disease and years of life lost between the highest income group and the income group below it.

People with very low incomes, for example, lack the resources to get nutritious food and safe housing. They may face financial and life stress which, over time, can have health consequences including high blood pressure and circulatory complications. On the other hand, those who have adequate income are likely to experience better health outcomes and to be less dependent on material needs like food and housing

Another example is employment. Working provides a person with economic opportunities that can influence their health, and their family's. This comes from both the income received, and from the sense of purpose and control working can generate. It can also impact physical and mental health depending on the type of work and working conditions.

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Having identified the factors that influence a population's health, we now have a starting point for making public policy decisions. Knowing the effects of income, education, food security

and the other determinants of health, we can make better quality decisions about which programs or policies are initiated and supported.

Learn more about public health, the determinants of health, and inequities in the Canadian health care from the "Report on the State of Public Health in Canada," by the Chief Public Health Officer from the **Public Health Agency of Canada**.