

What is Population Health?



This **Population Health** series explores the concept of population health and the role a hospital can play in producing population health. The series also offers local and international examples of health systems that have reached beyond their walls to improve the health of their communities.

What is Health?

The **World Health Organization** (WHO) defines “health” as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”¹.

What is Population Health?

Population health is defined as “the **health outcomes** of a **group of individuals**, including the distribution of such outcomes within the group”².

While there is no single accepted definition of population health, the key aspects of this concept include:

- A broader notion of **health** that acknowledges well-being beyond the physical state.
- The notion of a **group of individuals** or a **population** which can be defined by a geographic region, such as a country or a community, but also by other factors, such

as a group of employees, an ethnic group, or patients of a health system, etc.²

- Measuring **health outcomes** and recognizing the determinants that impact health. Health outcome indicators may include life expectancy at birth, health-adjusted life expectancy, infant mortality, suicide mortality, perceived mental health, mental illness hospitalization rate, diabetes, disability, obesity, etc.³
- The **distribution** of those health outcomes across that population, which takes health inequality and inequity into consideration.

What Impacts Health?

There are many factors that influence health. These factors and their impact on health outcomes fall into five categories⁴:

Determinants of Health		
Genetics and Biology	Genetics, body structure, body function	22%
Medical Care	Access to health care, quality of health care, patient engagement, health literacy	11%
Physical Environment	Pollution, location, exposure to firearms, allergens, etc.	7%
Social Circumstances	Social connectedness, social status, culture and tradition, race and ethnicity, citizenship status, sexual orientation, gender identity, discrimination, history of incarceration, work conditions, etc.	24%
Individual Behaviour	Physical activity, sleep patterns, diet patterns, psychological assets, negative mood and affects, risk-related behaviour (e.g., gun behaviour, sex activity, motor vehicle behaviour, etc.)	36%

The social determinants of health – the conditions in the environments where we were born, where we live, work, play and age – account for 60% of the factors that make us sick.

Medical care accounts only for 11 per cent of the factors that make us sick. More than 60 per cent of the factors are related to our social circumstances and individual behaviours, such as where we were born, where we live, work, play and age. These factors are called the **social determinants of health**⁴.

Population Health Management

The terms *population health management* or *population medicine* are used in clinical settings when applying population health concepts to a specific patient population⁵. Activities may include measuring population health status, analyzing determinants of health, making evidence-based decisions to develop strategies to improve health, investing upstream, collaborating across sectors, etc.

Social Medicine

- There are many descriptions of the term, “social medicine” in the literature, however, according to the [Social Medicine Network of Nova Scotia](#), they all share at least five common principles:
 - Community
 - Political action
 - Organization of services
 - Prevention of disease
 - Investigation of the causes and distribution of disease
- Social medicine is grounded in biology, history, law, economics, moral philosophy, and other fields of humanities and social sciences⁶.



Public Health

- Public health is “the organized effort of society to keep people healthy and prevent injury, illness and premature death.”⁷
- Traditionally, **public health** has been responsible for population health and disease control, the **health care sector** has focused on addressing the immediate, clinical needs of a population and **community agencies** have focused on the resources and services needed for healthy living (e.g., housing, transportation, supports for activities of daily living, etc.).
- However, there is a growing recognition that **all sectors** must work in partnership to truly improve the health of the population as no one single entity can tackle the upstream social conditions on its own⁸.

Additional Resources

The information above provides a high-level overview of population health and related concepts. The following resources may be helpful for exploring these topics in more depth.

- Watch this [three-minute animation](#) from The King’s Fund: What is a ‘population health’ approach? And what role do we all play in keeping our communities healthy?
- The Institute for Health Information’s [Pathways to Population Health \(P2PH\)](#) identifies four areas of work for health care organizations to accelerate their progress in improving health, well-being, and equity.
- The Rapid Improvement Support and Exchange (RISE) team provides a one-hour webinar on [population health management](#) for Ontario Health Teams - March 12, 2020.
- The Ontario Hospital Association’s resource page on the [SDH as it relates to COVID-19](#).
- The University of Toronto’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health hosted a four-part [Virtual Symposium on Population Health’s Past, Present, and Future](#).

References

- 1 World Health Organization (WHO) (n.d). *Constitution*. <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution>
- 2 Kindig, D. & Stoddart, G. (2003). What is population health? *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(3), 380-383, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447747/>
- 3 Public Health Agency of Canada (2018). *Key health inequalities in Canada: A national portrait. Pan-Canadian health inequalities reporting initiative*. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/science-research/key-health-inequalities-canada-national-portrait-executive-summary/key_health_inequalities_full_report-eng.pdf
- 4 Choi, E. & Sonin, J. (2018, February). *Determinants of health*. GoInvo. <https://www.goinvo.com/vision/determinants-of-health/#methodology>
- 5 Kindig, D. (2015, April 6). *What are we talking about when we talk about population health?* Health Affairs Blog. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20150406.046151/full/>
- 6 Dalhousie University (n.d). *What is social medicine?* Social Medicine Network of Nova Scotia. <https://www.dal.ca/sites/social-medicine/about/what-is-social-medicine-.html>
- 7 Canadian Public Health Association (n.d). *What is public health?* <https://www.cpha.ca/what-public-health#:~:text=Public%20health%20is%20the%20organized,the%20health%20of%20all%20Canadians>.
- 8 Green, K. & Zook, M. (2019, October 29). *When talking about social determinants, precision matters*. Health Affairs Blog. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20191025.776011/full/>

