

# The Concept of Health Equity

One of the most important aspects of population health is the distribution of health outcomes across a population, which takes health inequity and inequality into consideration.

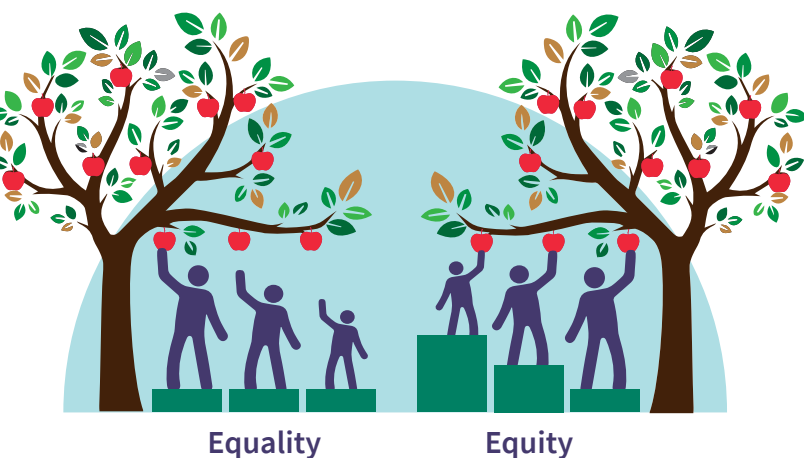
## Equity vs Equality

Health **equity** and health **equality** have different meanings. Equality means giving everyone the same thing, whereas equity means giving people what they need to be their healthiest selves.<sup>1</sup>

For example, in the picture below, three people of different heights are trying to reach the apple on the tree. The apple represents good health. The different heights represent the unequal distribution of the social determinants of health.

If we were to treat these people **equally**, they would be given the same box to stand on, which means only the tallest person would reach the apple.

If we were to treat these people **equitably**, we would provide them with the box size they need to reach the apple.



This example was adapted from [Saskatoon Health Region, 2014](#).

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.

## Health Equity

- “Means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.”<sup>2</sup>
- Watch this video from the World Health Organization: [What is Health Equity?](#)

## Health Inequality<sup>3</sup>

- Refers to differences in the health between individuals or groups.
- This definition does not indicate any moral judgment on whether the observed differences are fair. It is simply a description that can be used when quantities are unequal.
  - Example: when explaining that people in their 20s are generally healthier than those in their 60s, the term “health inequality” can be used.
- A recent Canadian study has shown that while premature and avoidable mortality rates have declined in most socioeconomic groups between 1991 and 2016, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups have not benefitted equally from these overall decreases in mortality. For example, among women without a high school diploma, premature mortality rates have persisted, and avoidable mortality has increased<sup>4</sup>.

### Health Inequity<sup>3</sup>

- A specific type of health inequality that represents an unjust difference in health.
- Health inequities are preventable and unnecessary; they can be avoided by reasonable means.
- For example, the term “health inequity” can be used to describe the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on visible minorities in [Canada](#).

### A Quick Review of Key Related Concepts

Term	Brief Explanation
<b>Equality</b>	Giving everyone the same thing.
<b>Equity</b>	Giving people what they need to be their healthiest selves.
<b>Health Equity</b>	Everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible.
<b>Health Inequality</b>	Refers to differences in the health between individuals or groups; no moral judgment on whether the observed differences are fair. It is simply a description that can be used when quantities are unequal.
<b>Health Inequity</b>	A specific type of health inequality that represents an unjust difference in health; health inequities are preventable and unnecessary.

### Additional Resources

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

- [Health Quality Ontario](#) for information related to health outcomes and equity in Ontario.
- The [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation \(RWJF\)](#) and the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) developed a report to stimulate discussion about what health equity means in practical terms: [What is Health Equity? And What Difference Does a Definition Make?](#) (2017).
- 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](#).
- Book: [The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World](#) by Michael Marmot (2015)

### References

- 1 Saskatoon Health Region. (2014). *Equity vs equality*. Northwestern Health Unit. <https://www.nwhu.on.ca/ourservices/Pages/Equity-vs-Equality.aspx#:~:text=Health%20equity%20and%20health%20equality,to%20reach%20their%20best%20health>.
- 2 Bravemenan, P., Arkin E., Orleans T., Proctor D. & Plough A. (2017). *What is health equity?* Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2017/05/what-is-health-equity-.html>
- 3 Arcaya, M.C., Arcaya, A.L. & Subramanian, S.V. (2015). Inequalities in health: definitions, concepts, and theories. *Global Health Action*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4481045/>
- 4 Dhahidi, F.V., Parina, A. & Siddiqi, A. (2020). Trends in socioeconomic inequalities in premature and avoidable mortality in Canada, 1991-2016. *CMAJ*, 192(39). <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/39/E1114>