Public Health Terminology

**Assessment**: One of three core functions of public health. It involves the regular and systematic collection, assembly, analysis, and reporting of information important to public health.

**Assurance**: One of three core functions of public health. Involves providing services that are needed to achieve public health goals.

**Communicable Diseases (Infectious Diseases/Contagious Diseases)**: These diseases spread from one person to another or from an animal to a person. This can happen via airborne viruses or bacteria, or through blood or other bodily fluids. Diseases that fit this categorization include AIDS, influenza, malaria, tuberculosis, and polio. These diseases can affect large populations, causing sickness and death. As a result, much attention in public health is paid to these diseases to ensure the general health of large groups of people.

**Core Function**: Established by National Academy of Sciences, core functions guide the field of public health. The three functions are: Assessment, policy development, and assurance.

**Determinants of Health (or Health Status Indicators)**: Combined factors, both personal and environmental, that affect the health of individuals and communities. Examples of these determinants include:

- Social and economic environment
  - Income and social status-Higher income and social status are linked to better health
  - Education-Low education levels are linked with poor health
  - Culture-Family, friends, and community interaction all impact health.
  - Health services-Access to preventative care and disease treatment greatly impacts health.
- Physical environment
  - Water purity
  - Clean air
  - Safe workplace
  - Safe housing
- Individuals’ characteristics and behaviors
  - Genetics-Genes passed down from parents play a part in lifespan, healthiness, and likelihood of certain illnesses.
  - Personal behavior-Eating habits, physical activity, smoking, drinking all impact health.
  - Gender-Men and women are susceptible to different diseases

**Essential Services**: Built on the three core functions of public health, these services elaborate on what public health professionals do. Essential services are: Monitor health, diagnose and investigate, inform, educate, empower, mobilize community partnerships, develop policies, enforce laws, link to/provide care, assure competent workforce, evaluate.
**Health Disparities:** Health differences that are closely linked with social, economic, and/or environmental disadvantages.

**Health Status Indicators:** Measures of important health determinants that allow researchers to assess how healthy populations are. Examples of indicators include leading causes of death, measures of birth, and environmental health.

**Morbidity:** This refers to a diseased condition or state within a person or population.

**Mortality:** This refers to the end of life. In public health, mortality is typically viewed at population levels in rates per a certain number, depending on the size of the overall population being viewed. Understanding mortality rates and causes of death can help public health professionals identify their successes and areas where they need to do additional work.

**Policy Development:** One of three core functions of public health. Involves creation of comprehensive public policies that promote use of knowledge in decision making.

**Population:** Distinct groupings within a society that are analyzed with health status indicators to determine health disparities that may exist within society.

**Public Health:** A multidisciplinary field that promotes the welfare of the individual and the community.

**Risk Factors:** The World Health Organization (WHO) describes risk factors as underlying issues associated with non-communicable diseases that are common and preventable. The WHO organizes risk factors into four particular behaviors that lead to four key metabolic/physiological changes.

**Behaviors**

- **Alcohol Abuse:** According to the WHO and the Global Information System on Alcohol and Health (GISAH) indicate that “harmful use of alcohol results in the death of 2.5 million people annually.” Additionally, 60 diseases are significantly caused by alcohol.
- **Tobacco Use:** Approximately 6 million people die from tobacco use and exposure to smoke every year. Smokers make up about 22% of the world’s population. For more information about mortality attributable to tobacco, download the WHO’s report: http://www.who.int/gho/tobacco/en/index.html.
- **Physical Inactivity:** Insufficient physical activity is the fourth leading risk factor for mortality. Approximately 3.2 million deaths each year are attributable to insufficient physical activity.
- **Unhealthy Diet:** Not eating a balanced diet can lead to serious health problems, including death. Approximately 1.7 million deaths worldwide can be attributed to low fruit and vegetable consumption.

**Metabolic/Physiological Changes**

- **Raised Blood Pressure:** Globally, raised blood pressure causes approximately 7.5 million deaths per year. It is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke.
- Overweight/Obesity: Each year, at least 2.8 million people die as a result of being overweight or obese. These changes increase risks of coronary heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Raised body mass can also increase the risk of cancer. viii

- Raised Blood Glucose: Making up 5.8% of all deaths in 2004, raised glucose levels lead to diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Additionally, raised levels can lead to stroke, lower limb amputations, visual impairment.ix

- Raised Cholesterol: This change increases the risks of heart disease and stroke. The WHO estimates that raised cholesterol is estimated to cause 2.6 million deaths (4.5%) total and 29.7 million disability adjusted life years.x

Vaccines: Vaccines are an excellent way to decrease communicable diseases. The vaccine contains either a killed or weakened form of a virus or bacteria. Once administered, the vaccine stimulates the production of antibodies, which will develop immunity to the virus or bacteria.xi Since vaccines prevent disease in the first place, they are a key tool in maintaining a high degree of public health and can significantly reduce health care costs. To learn more about vaccinations and when they should be administered, visit the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s website at http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/index.html.

---


