



How Does Inequity Affect Health?

Health was once believed to be solely an individual's responsibility. For example, a common attitude is that people can choose to be physically active or not.

However, growing evidence suggests that one's health is influenced more by poverty and inequity. This is because our ability to make healthy choices is limited by the choices available to us.

"Inequity – through poverty and exclusion – has more impact on health than the choices people make in their daily life." (Turning the Tide 10)

"Inequity occurs when things are unfair or unjust. There can be inequities because of gender, race, income, resources and other social and economic factors." (Turning the Tide 2)

"Health inequities occur when some people – because they have more money, higher status, more education, etc. – have a better chance of being healthy." (Turning the Tide 2)

Poverty is a more reliable predictor of poor health and chronic disease than factors such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and smoking.²

Determinants of Health

There are a number of factors or "determinants" that influence our choices around healthy living. Using the twelve determinants of health recognized by Health Canada³, the following considerations illustrate how one's ability to participate in physical activity are influenced by more than individual choice.

Income and social status

- Are basic needs met? (food, shelter, clothing, children)
- Are opportunities affordable? (including fees, equipment, transportation, childcare)
- Is there a sense of belonging and acceptance? (Do I 'fit in'?)

Social support networks

- Is the person socially isolated?
- Are family and friends supportive of physical activity and help enable participation?
- Does the person have a 'buddy' for moral support?

Education and literacy

- Is information about physical activity and opportunities available in simple language?
- Does the person know how to apply this information in their life?
- Does the person have the education to improve their life situation?

Employment and working conditions

- Are hours of work and type of work conducive to leisure time physical activity before, during or after work?
- Is the location of work conducive to leisure time physical activity before, during or after work?



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Social environments

- Does the person feel a connection with the community in which they live and/or work?
- Does the person feel welcome and accepted in physical activity opportunities?
- Is the person empowered to voice their opinion about issues that affect their participation?
- Is the person involved in planning or decisions that affect physical activity opportunities in their community?

Physical environments

- Does the person live in an affordable home that is in good repair?
- Does the person feel safe walking in their neighbourhood?
- Does the built environment easily and safely support a physically active lifestyle? (sidewalks, bike lanes, trails)

Personal health practices and coping skills

- Does the person have confidence in their knowledge and skills to make informed choices about healthy practices?
- Does the person know how to find information about healthy lifestyles?
- Can the person easily practice leisure time physical activity to cope with stress?

Healthy child development

- Was physical activity valued by the person's family?
- Were there opportunities to build basic skills through recreation, sport or positive play in the person's childhood?
- Does the person have positive associations with physical activity experiences from childhood?

Biology and genetic endowment

- Are there any biological or genetic factors that influence the person's health?

Services to promote, maintain and restore health

- Are physical activity opportunities available within walking distance and are they barrier-free?
- Are there a range of opportunities available that suit diverse needs and interests?
- Are there programs and services available to support beginners?
- Are there opportunities to introduce people to recreation and physical activity settings?

Gender

- What different needs do women and men have that affect their ability or motivation to participate?
- Are these different needs valued and addressed effectively?

Culture

- Are there culturally appropriate physical activity opportunities?
- Are physical activity opportunities socially inclusive?
- Do opportunities support intercultural connection and learning?

Physical activity promotes and maintains health. However, our health is affected by the choices available to us. To ensure community members affected by poverty have an equal chance of making healthy choices, root causes or determinants that affect one's ability to choose physical activity need to be considered and addressed.

References

- ¹ Public Health Agency of Canada, Atlantic Region. Turning the Tide Toolkit: Why Acting on Inequity Can Help Reduce Chronic Disease. (PHAC, 2005). www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/atlantic/Publications/Tides_of_change
- ² Dennis Raphael. Inequality is Bad for Our Hearts: Why Low Income and Social Exclusion are Major Causes of Heart Disease in Canada. (North York Heart Health Network, 2001). <http://depts.washington.edu/eqhlth/paperA15.html>
- ³ Public Health Agency of Canada. "Key Determinants." Dec. 2001. What determines health? www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/determinants