

Population Health

What is population health?

Population health is thinking beyond the health of an individual and looking at the health outcomes of a whole community. It considers *all* the factors that influence the overall health of a specific population including the social and structural conditions in which people are born, work, live and age.

The social determinants of health (Health Canada, 2004), as adopted by Canada and many other nations, are:

- *Employment and Working Conditions* – People who are employed are healthier, and working conditions are known to have an impact on health.
- *Gender* – Some conditions and diseases are linked to gender.
- *Healthy Child Development* – Prenatal and early childhood experiences affect health, well-being, and competence.
- *Income and Social Status* – The greater the gap between the richest and poorest classes, the greater the disparities in health across the population.
- *Social Support Networks and Social Environments* – Support from family, friends, and communities is linked to better health.
- *Education* – The more education one has, the more likely one is to be healthy.
- *Health Services and Social Services* – A person's health benefits from access to services that prevent disease and maintain and promote health.
- *Physical Environments* – Clean air and water, healthy workplaces, safe and affordable housing, and safe communities and roads are known to improve one's health.
- *Biology and Genetics* – Some physical characteristics that a person inherits play a role in how long s/he lives, how healthy s/he will be, and how much at risk he/she is for certain illnesses.
- *Personal Health Practices and Coping Skills* – Diet, levels of physical activity, habits such as smoking, drinking, and gambling, and the way one responds to other people, stresses, and challenges all affect an individual's health.
- *Culture* – Customs, race, traditions, and beliefs of families, communities, and individuals all affect health.

Differences in the social determinants of health result in health inequities – the unnecessary or unjust conditions that result in differences in people's health status or health outcomes. This explains why variation in health exists between people of different socioeconomic status or why those identifying as Indigenous peoples experience greater morbidity and mortality from chronic disease compared with non-Indigenous peoples. The WHO's landmark report *Closing the gap in a generation* concluded that inequities in the social determinants of health are a global killer

requiring urgent, inter-sectoral, whole-of-government attention and action (World Health Organization, Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008).

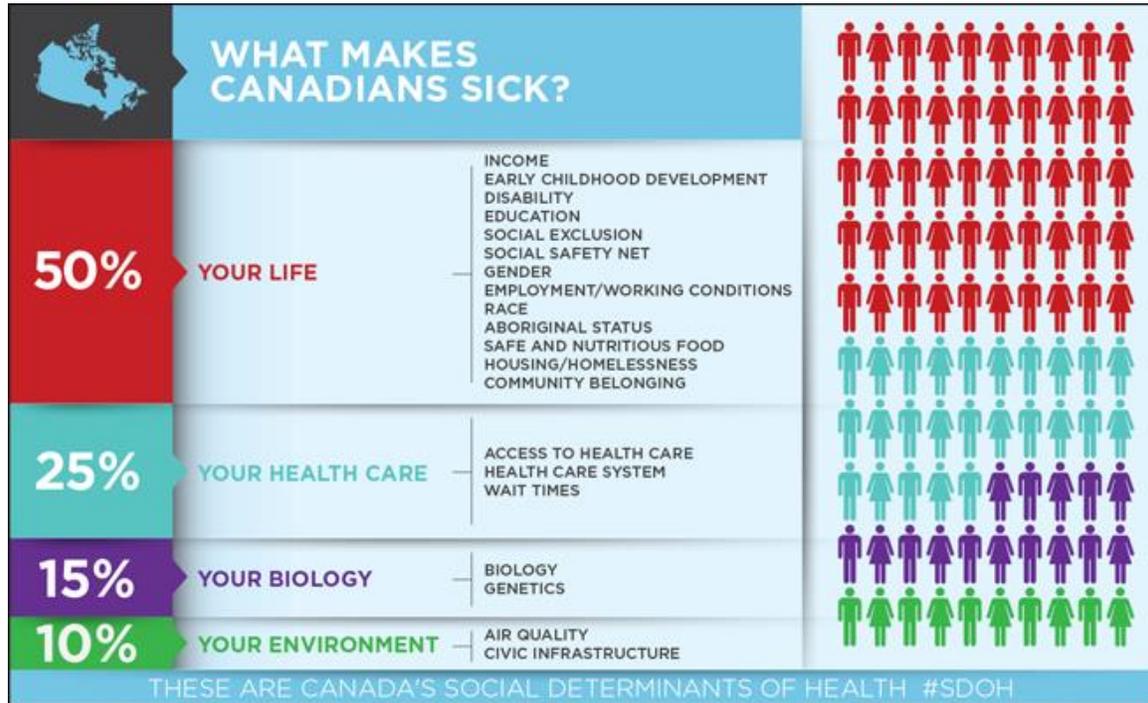


Image Source: Canadian Medical Association, 2015

The moral imperative to achieve health equity is certain but it is also good economic stewardship to invest in population health. Health inequities result in direct and indirect costs to the health system. Canadian data suggests that socioeconomic health inequalities result annually in \$6.2 billion of direct health care costs (representing 14% of acute care costs in the form of inpatient hospital admissions, prescription drug costs, and physician consultation services); furthermore, 60% of these direct costs are attributed to persons within the lowest income group (Social Determinants and Science Integration Directorate, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2016).

How can we achieve our population health goals?

We can achieve our population health goals by focusing on reducing health inequities, drawing attention to the variety of factors that are known to have impact on individual and community health. The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends taking a [population health approach](#) which is further highlighted in [The Population Health Approach in Nova Scotia](#).

The Healthy Populations Institute champions building health equity by addressing the fundamental causes and structural barriers of unhealthy lives and communities in Atlantic Canada and beyond. It is imperative that we research the wider determinants of health and create solutions that allow all members of a population to be well.