



Pathways to Wellness

Where People Live, Work, and Play

Health organizations and providers recognize that health is more than the absence of illness or disease. Yet, there is no universal definition for health. One holistic way of thinking about health includes eight dimensions of wellness (Table 1). Each dimension affects the other and influences the way in which a person thinks about health. This makes health a complex topic with personal meaning.

Health and wellness are a lifelong journey that can include many detours. Embracing health across the dimensions of wellness helps individuals cope with stress, learn self-management skills, and maintain relationships. Understanding that there may be varying degrees of health within the wellness dimensions helps people realize that health can fluctuate over time and that individuals can optimize health even when confronted with illness.

Table 1. Dimensions of Health and Wellness

Dimension of Wellness	Explanation
Emotional	Coping effectively with life and creating satisfying relationships
Spiritual	Expanding one's sense of purpose and meaning in life
Environmental	Enjoying good health by occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support well-being
Financial	Satisfaction with current and future financial situations
Intellectual	Recognizing creative abilities and finding ways to expand knowledge and skills
Occupational	Personal satisfaction and enrichment from one's work
Physical	Recognizing the need for physical activity, healthy foods, and sleep
Social	Developing a sense of connection, belonging, and a well-developed support system

Source: Swarbrick, 2006

Lifestyle and Family Factors that Influence Health and Wellness

Low-risk lifestyle factors can promote health and wellness and help prevent and manage chronic disease. Low-risk lifestyle behaviors include eating a healthy diet, getting at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity physical activity, using alcohol in moderation (if at all), and not smoking. Staying hydrated, managing stress, being social, and getting good sleep also contribute to overall health and well-being. Family health history and a variety of generational forces also contribute to health and well-being or the lack thereof. The genes with which people are born and the habits or choices learned as a child influence health across the life span.

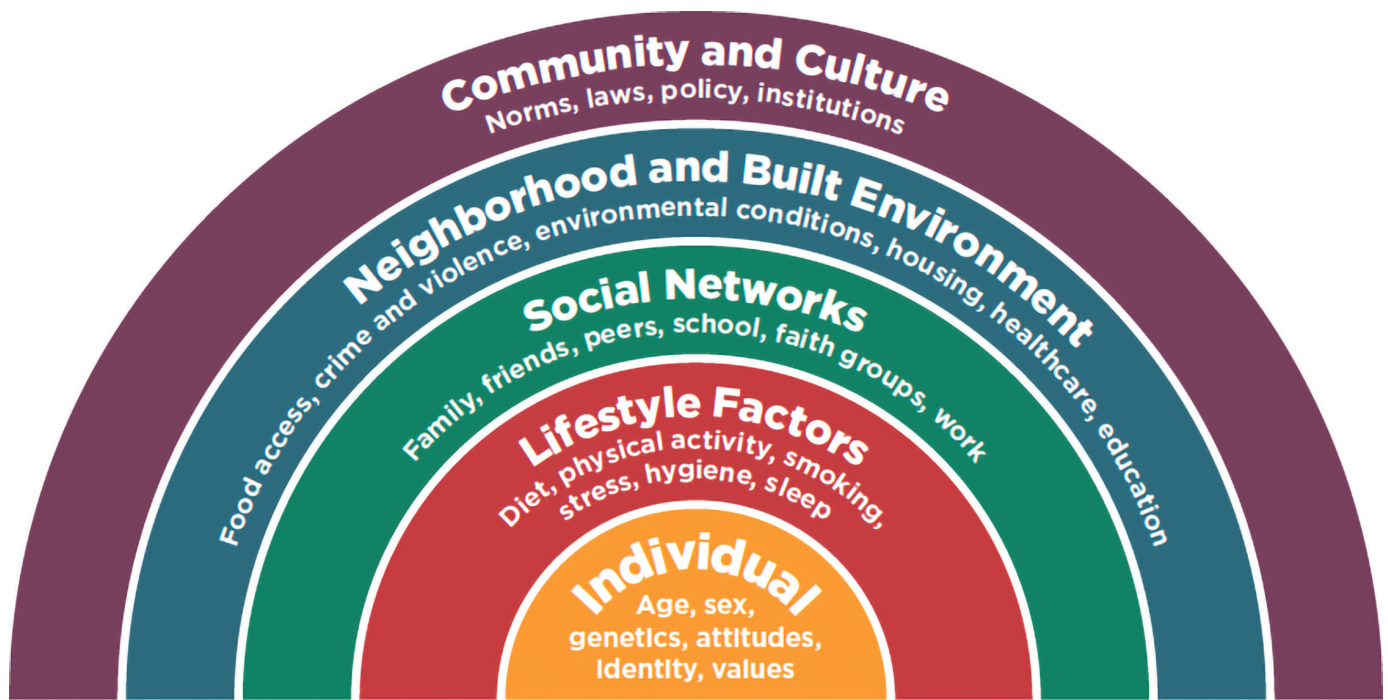
Social Determinants of Health and Wellness

Many factors besides genes and lifestyle impact the health of an individual and even a community or country. The environments in which individuals live, learn, work, and play also affect overall health and wellness. Experts call these circumstances, which can have positive or negative effects, "social determinants of health." Social determinants fall into five categories:

1. Access to health care and the quality of available health care
2. Access to education from early childhood through high school, enrollment in higher education, and the quality of education and job training
3. Social and community context, meaning the values and work of a community to promote well-being of all its members
4. Economic stability, including employment, housing, poverty, and food insecurity
5. Neighborhood and built environment, including access to resources for daily needs, public safety, transportation options, and environmental conditions

Social determinants of health directly and indirectly influence health and behavior. The distribution of money, power, and resources influences the social determinants of health and can create barriers that prevent individuals or communities from reaching their full health potential. For example, people may be at a disadvantage because of racism, socioeconomic status, or the structural failures associated

Figure 1. The multiple levels of influence on health and wellness.



Adapted from Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991

with certain geographic locations. As a result, the number of deaths attributable to social factors such as lack of education, racial segregation, discrimination, and poverty may be equal to deaths from the country's leading causes of death such as heart disease and cancer.

Figure 1 uses a rainbow to show the multiple levels of influence on a person's health, known as the social ecological model. It also highlights the connections between each of the levels. At the center of the rainbow is the person, complete with their genetic blueprint, family history, lifestyle habits, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and personality traits. The rainbow extends to include social networks, neighborhoods and built environment, and community and culture. Interacting layers of social determinants within the areas of living, learning, working, and playing surround the person and show how they influence health. This model highlights the importance of moving beyond a focus on personal behavior and promotes an understanding of the wide range of factors beyond an individual that influences health.

Focus on Social Determinants of Health

Regardless of a person's age, race, ethnicity, religion, education, political beliefs, economic, social, or living circumstances, a high standard of health is a basic right. To achieve this right, all people need access to health services when and where they need them, without suffering financial hardship, stigma, or discrimination. Addressing the social determinants of health like safe and affordable housing, access to education, public safety, availability of healthy foods, local emergency/health services, and environments free of life-

threatening toxins can help improve overall health and wellness.

In 1979, the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion began a national program to reduce preventable death and injury and improve health and well-being in the United States. The effort is called Healthy People. Now in its fifth edition, Healthy People 2030 aims to:

- Attain healthy, thriving lives and well-being, free of preventable disease, disability, injury, and premature death.
- Eliminate health disparities, achieve health equity, and attain health literacy to improve the health and well-being of all.
- Create social, physical, and economic environments that promote attaining full potential for health and well-being for all.
- Promote healthy development, healthy behavior, and well-being across all life stages.
- Engage leadership, key constituents, and the public across multiple sectors to act and design policies that improve the health and well-being of all.

All communities and individuals are encouraged to adopt the Healthy People 2030 goals to optimize health and decrease chronic disease. It will take personal effort as well as cooperation across agencies at the local, state, and national levels to make it easier and more accessible for all people to be healthy. Reach out to your local Cooperative Extension office to learn about resources available to support individuals and the community in working toward healthier conditions for all people to live, learn, work, and play.

Conclusion

Social determinants of health influence overall health and well-being across the life span. The rainbow social ecological model demonstrates the power of moving the focus from a person's behavior. The rainbow model also emphasizes how important it is to understand a wider range of social, environmental, and societal factors that affect health and well-being. Coordinated action from agencies, communities, and individuals are needed to change social, environmental, and societal factors in ways that support health for all people.

*"Good health begins in the places where we live, learn, work, and play."
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*

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