

What is Public Health?

Public health programs address the physical, mental, and environmental health concerns of communities and populations at risk for disease and injury. The public health system is our first line of defense against challenges to our nation's health and safety and is made up of a network of federal, state, and local entities as well as the private, nonprofit, and voluntary sectors.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services' health.gov web site, public health:

- Prevents epidemics and controls the spread of disease
- Fosters safe and healthy environments
- Prevents injury and disability
- Promotes and encourages healthy behaviors
- Responds to disasters and assists communities in recovery
- Assures the quality and accessibility of health services

The U.S. Public Health System

- ♦ Over 3,000 county and city health departments and local boards of health
- ♦ 59 state and territorial health departments
- ♦ More than 160,000 public and private laboratories
- ♦ Multiple federal departments and agencies
- ♦ Hospitals and other health care providers
- ♦ Volunteer organizations

Public health is a broad field encompassing a wide range of disciplines. Some of the professions represented in the public health workforce include: physicians, nurses, dentists, health educators, administrators, veterinarians, environmental health specialists, nutritionists, epidemiologists, and statisticians. This, of course, is only a partial list.

The Institute of Medicine has identified three core functions of public health: assessment, policy development, and assurance. Within those three core functions, there are ten essential public health elements. To learn more go to <http://www.health.gov/phfunctions/public.htm>.

Major tasks of public health partners today include:

- Collecting, analyzing and disseminating data related to health and disease
- Developing and carrying out strategies for disease and injury prevention and control
- Educating and empowering the public about health matters
- Developing, implementing, and enforcing laws, policies and regulations related to health
- Linking people to essential health services and providing those services when necessary
- Conducting population-based studies of disease, including developing methods to prevent or control the effects of those diseases

For more information on public health activities read the CDC's list of the "10 Great Public Health Achievements in the Twentieth Century" at <http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/media/tengpha.htm>. This web page links you to several detailed *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* articles from 1999 that cover: Immunizations, Motor-Vehicle Safety, Workplace Safety, Control of Infectious Diseases, Declines in Deaths from Heart Disease and Stroke, Safer and Healthier Foods, Healthier Mothers and Babies, Family Planning,

Fluoridation of Drinking Water, Tobacco as a Health Hazard, and Future Directions of Public Health.

Public Health Myths

Myth #1 – Public health only serves the poor.

Fact – Public health benefits everyone who, regardless of background and health status, breathes the air, drinks water, owns a pet, or eats at a restaurant.

Myth #2 – Public health does not have an effect on my quality of life.

Fact – Public health improves and saves lives every day. Without public health communities would not benefit from the wide variety of vital programs and services they rely on to protect their everyday health, including:

- Safe food supplies
- Systems to monitor disease
- Vaccines to protect against infectious disease
- Clean drinking water and wastewater treatment systems
- Research that provides solutions to community health problems
- Public health workers dedicated to promoting good health for all

Myth #3 – Public health is the provision of health care services and primarily occurs at hospitals.

Fact – While hospitals often provide basic public health services to individuals in need, the general thrust of public health is to focus on the needs of the community as a whole and to design interventions to address those broader needs.

Myth #4 – Public health only focuses on the treatment of disease.

Fact – Public health focuses on community-based disease treatment *and* prevention. While caring for the ill is an important element of this strategy, it is only one of the aspects that is needed to achieve the overall mission of ensuring the health and well-being of all Americans.

Myth #5 – CDC is the only federal agency engaged in public health.

Fact – CDC does work on a wide variety of public health issues and is generally the lead federal agency on these activities, but other agencies such as HRSA, EPA, SAMHSA and NIH also play a role in the development, implementation and assessment of public health policies.

Note: An original version of this document was drafted by a colleague who once worked for the federal government. It was never used for its intended purpose, and was provided to the Campaign for Public Health with the thought that it may help explain public health to the general public.