

# Topic 1: What does health mean?

## What is health?

Health is a complex and dynamic concept involving a range of perspectives. There are many ways in which the word health is understood. According to the WHO, health is the 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 1948). However, health goes beyond this definition and should consider the complex connections between social, cultural, economic, environmental and political conditions in which ones lives. Health also encompasses power, resources and the ability to adapt.

### What is health? [3:43 mins]

Watch this video on what is health by Melissa Graham from the teaching team.

[\[Transcript\]](#)

### What does being healthy mean to you? [3:51 mins]

Now watch this short video produced by the WHO where people talk about what health means to them. Notice, it means something different for each person and covers the range of meanings described above.

What does being healthy mean to you?



As you can see health as a concept is complex, dynamic and has multiple meanings and as such it is difficult to define. How one defines health can be dependent on context and it can have different meanings for different people, groups or populations. How health is understood also varies by discipline and this perspective on what health is affects each disciplines approach to health practice. For example, the biological perspective considers the role of genes and risk factors and how these interact with determinants of health (Liamputtong et al. 2012).

Baum (2016) outlines three main approaches to defining health:

1. The biomedical (or clockwork model)
2. The absence of disease
3. The wellbeing model

The biomedical model (or clockwork model) is 'defined as the body operating efficiently like a machine. Any breakdown in the body system mean that it is not healthy'. The biomedical approach to conceptualising health views health and illness in terms of people's medical pathology. This perspective is not concerned with the context of people's lives, what caused the illness or how it could be prevented, but rather focuses on fixing it once it has occurred. For example, if one is free from disease and/or injury they are healthy, thus health is considered as the absence of disease. However, the biomedical approach does distinguish between disease and illness whereby disease is a 'set of signs and symptoms and medically diagnosed pathological abnormalities' (Baum 2008, p. 4). In contrast, illness is mainly concerned with how an individual experience the disease (Baum 2008, p. 4).

The behavioural approach to conceptualising health focuses on people's behaviours and seeks to address the risk and lifestyle behaviours that are associated with poor health (Baum 2016). Similar to the biomedical approach, it does not consider the cause of the risk or lifestyle behaviours (these are known as determinants of health and we will discuss these in more detail shortly).

In contrast to these approaches, the public health approach to health focuses on 'social and political actions aimed at improving health, prolonging life and improving the quality of life among whole populations' (Keleher & MacDougall 2016, p. 5). As you can see the public health conceptualisation of health is based on the determinants approach; it 'situates health and social problems in the broader social, structural and cultural conditions of our society' (Keleher & MacDougall 2016, p. 5). The public health approach to defining health focuses on wellbeing. Like health, it is difficult to conceptualise and define wellbeing. However, wellbeing can be thought of as happiness and life satisfaction. Visit the [Better Health Channel website](#) to learn more about wellbeing, the factors that influence wellbeing, and how to achieve wellbeing.

*Health is a social, economic and political issue and above all a fundamental human right.  
Inequality, poverty, exploitation, violence and injustice are at the root of ill-health*

[People's Charter for Health, 2000](#)

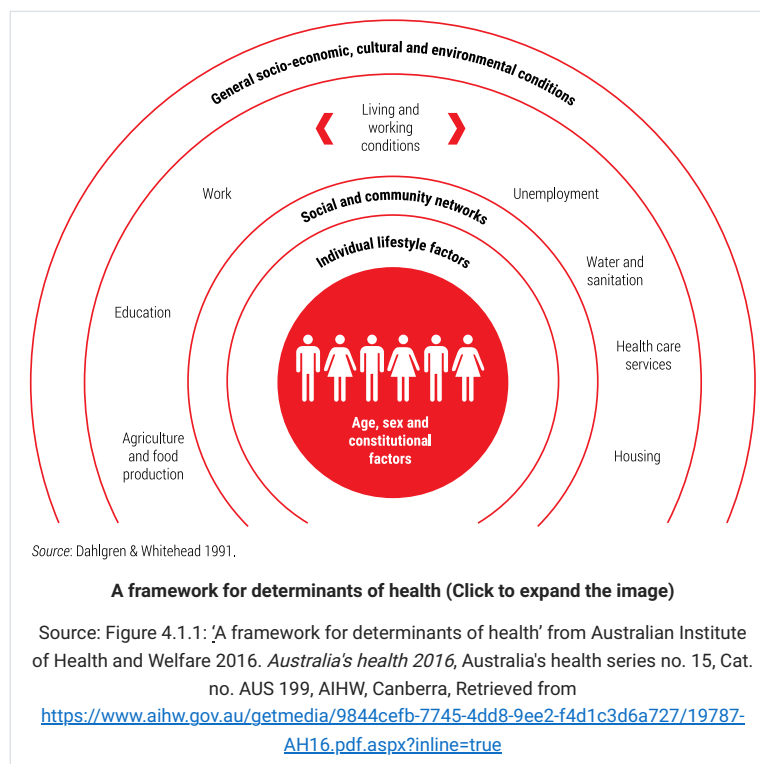
## Introduction to the determinants of health

When we think about the determinants of health (that is, what determines health) people often think in terms of risk factors but there is more to health than just thinking about risks. Our health is influenced by the choices that we make — whether we exercise, smoke, are immunised or have a healthy diet all have an impact on our health. Less well recognised is the influence of broader social factors on health. Evidence on the close relationship between living and working conditions and health outcomes has led to a renewed appreciation of how human health is sensitive to the social, economic and political environment (WHO 2017; Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). Factors such as income, education, conditions of employment, power and social support can act to strengthen or undermine the health of individuals and communities (AIHW 2016). Because of their powerful effects, these health-determining factors are known as the 'social determinants of health' (Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). These will be explored in further depth in Week 4.

Determinants of health are the range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors which determine the health status of individuals or populations. The WHO has described **social determinants** as 'the circumstances in which people grow, live, work, and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness. The conditions in which people live and die are, in turn, shaped by political, social, and economic forces' (CSDH 2008, p. 1).

The figure below illustrates how the social determinants extend inward to affect other factors including behaviours and biomedical factors that are part of each person's individual lifestyle and genetic makeup.





As you can see, whether people are healthy or not is determined by their circumstances and environment. To a large extent, factors such as where we live, the state of our environment, genetics, our income and education level, and our relationships with friends and family all have considerable impacts on our health. It is clear the context of people's lives determines their health, and so blaming individuals for having poor health is not appropriate. According to the WHO (2008), the social conditions in which people are born, live and work is the single most important determinant of good health or ill health. We often hear people saying things like 'overweight people shouldn't eat junk food' – this approach to thinking about health is common but unhelpful. What it attempts to do is blame the victim (i.e. it is the person's fault that they are overweight as they are not eating the right food) and does not consider what else might be going on.

The WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) have recently completed their final report on the social determinants of health. There are three main principles of action outlined in the report.

1. Improve the conditions of daily life (this refers to the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and age).
2. Tackle the inequitable distribution of power, money and resources (these are the structural drivers of those conditions of daily life on a global, national and local level).
3. Measure and understand the problem, evaluate the actions that are taken, expand the evidence base, develop a workforce that is trained in SDH and raise public awareness of the underlying causes of health inequity (we will learn more about health inequity and inequality in Week 3).

You can access the full report here:

- The WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health 2008, [Closing the gap in a generation](#). Commission on Social Determinants of Health final report. World Health Organization.

## Social determinants of health – an introduction [6:28 mins]

Now watch this short video that explains the social determinants of health. Importantly, public health is not only concerned with preventing disease in the biomedical sense, it is also concerned with preventing causes of, and causes of the causes of, poor health, with a focus on determinants of health.

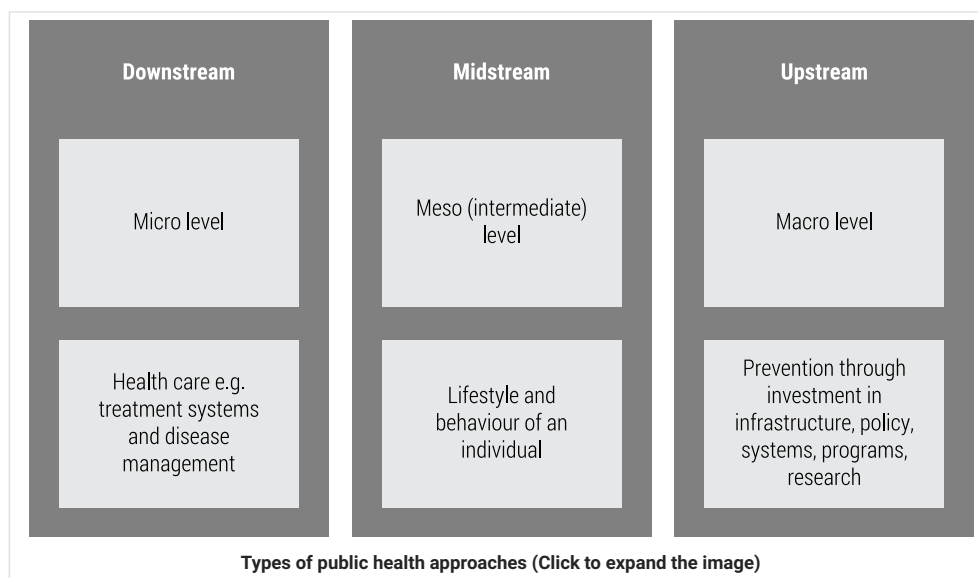


## What Makes Us Healthy? Understanding the Social Determinants of Health



### Upstream, downstream and midstream factors

As we can see from the discussion on the determinants of health, there are myriad factors that influence our health and wellbeing, and as such public health approaches need to be responsive to these factors. A key principle in public health practice is the need to consider how the factors that influence our health are situated along a continuum, and thus, we can address public health problems along a continuum, from the downstream to the upstream. While most public health approaches are situated upstream, it is essential that multiple approaches are used from across the continuum. Many of us are more familiar with downstream approaches. Upstream determinants are those that occur at the macro level and include global forces and government policies. Midstream determinants are intermediate factors such as health behaviours while downstream determinants occur at the micro level and include one's genetics. When addressing health problems, for example, in clinical medicine the focus is biomedical, that is, treating individual people who have a disease or injury – this is a downstream approach. Upstream approaches are more concerned with addressing the systems and structures that determine the downstream poor health outcomes. The figure below provides an overview of the types of public health approaches from downstream to upstream.



### Introduction to upstream [1:23 mins]

Watch this short video that explains downstream vs upstream.



## Introduction to Upstream



As you can see, public health acknowledges the importance of quality, affordable, and timely health services downstream, and addressing behavioural risks for poor health; however, the goal of public health is to prevent poor health by addressing the determinants that cause poor health. In this way, the focus of public health upstream has the potential to lessen the burden on health care services and improve the health of the population. Throughout this subject we will examine public health approaches across this continuum.



### Required reading

The following readings will expand on and reinforce your understanding about health and ways in which we can conceptualise health.

- [How should we define health?](#)

### Recommended reading

- Chapter 1: 'Understanding health definitions and perspectives' in: Baum, F 2016, [The new public health](#), 4th edn, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.



### Discussion: What health means to you

Take a photo of what health means to you and share a brief reflection on why this photo represents health to you. Identify one upstream, downstream and midstream factor that influences your health.

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Take a photo of what health means to you and share a brief reflection on why this photo represents health to you. Identify one upstream, downstream and midstream factor that influences your health.



My Room

Anonymous 16d  
My Room

Window of my room

This picture illustrates my room where I spend most of my time. I have painted my walls white so that I get calm, relaxing vibes from the place

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Last modified: Wednesday, 25 January 2023, 6:43 AM

