

Public Health Terminology

Access

Access is the potential for or actual entry of a population into the health system. Entry is dependent upon the wants, resources, and needs that individuals bring to the care-seeking process. The ability to obtain wanted or needed services may be influenced by many factors, including travel, distance, waiting time, available financial resources, and availability of a regular source of care. Access also refers to the extent to which a public health service is readily available to the community's individuals in need. Accessibility also refers to the capacity of the agency to provide service in such a way as to reflect and honor the social and cultural characteristics of the community and focuses on agency efforts to reduce barriers to service utilization.

Source: Turnock, BJ. Public Health: What It Is and How It Works. Jones and Bartlett. 2009.

Accreditation

The development of a set of standards, a process to measure health department performance against those standards, and some form of reward or recognition for those agencies meeting the standards.

Assessment

Assessment is defined as:

1. Collecting, analyzing, and using data to educate and mobilize communities, develop priorities, garner resources, and plan actions to improve public health.
 2. One of the three core functions of public health, involving the systematic collection and analysis of data in order to provide a basis for decision-making. This may include collecting statistics on community health status, health needs, community assets and/or other public health issues. The process of regularly and systematically collecting, assembling, analyzing, and making available information on the health needs of the community, including statistics on health status, community health needs, and epidemiologic and other studies of health problems.
- Source: Assessment in Action: Improving Community Health Assessment Practice, Clegg and Associates, 2003); Institute of Medicine. The Future of Public Health. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1988); Novick LF, Mays GP. Public Health Administration: Principles for Population-Based Management. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers; 2001.

Assurance

Making sure that all populations have access to appropriate and cost effective care, including health promotion and disease prevention services. The services are assured by encouraging actions by others, by collaboration with other organizations, by requiring action through regulation, or by direct provision of services.

Behavioral risk factors

Risk factors in this category include behaviors that are believed to cause, or to be contributing factors to most accidents, injuries, disease, and death during youth and adolescence as well as

significant morbidity and mortality in later life. This is a category recommended for collection in the Community Health Profile.

Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS)

The BRFSS is a random telephone survey of state residents aged 18 and older in households with telephones. In 2009, the BRFSS began conducting surveys by cellular phone in addition to traditional “landline” telephones. BRFSS was initially developed in the early 1980s by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in collaboration with state health departments and is currently conducted in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and several United States territories. Through BRFSS, information is collected in a routine, standardized manner at the state level on a variety of health behaviors and preventive health practices related to the leading causes of death and disability such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and injuries. BRFSS interviews are conducted monthly and data are analyzed annually (on a calendar-year basis).

Benchmarks

Benchmarks are points of reference or a standard against which measurements can be compared. In the context of indicators and public health, a benchmark is an accurate data point, which is used as a reference for future comparisons (similar to a baseline). Sometimes it is also referred to as “best practices” in a particular field. Communities compare themselves against these standards. Many groups use benchmark as a synonym for indicator or target. Source: Norris T, Atkinson A, et al. The Community Indicators Handbook: Measuring Progress toward Healthy and Sustainable Communities. San Francisco, CA: Redefining Progress; 1997.

Best practice(s)

The best clinical or administrative practice or approach at the moment, given the situation, the consumer’s or community’s needs and desires, the evidence about what works for this situation/need/desire, and the resources available. Organizations also often use promising practices, which are defined as clinical or administrative practices for which there is considerable evidence or expert consensus and which show promise in improving outcomes, but which are not yet proven by the highest or strongest scientific evidence.

Board of Health

A board of health is a legally designated governing entity whose members are appointed or elected to provide advisory functions and/or governing oversight of public health activities, including assessment, assurance, and policy development, for the protection and promotion of health in their community.

Source: National Public Health Performance Standards Program, Acronyms, Glossary, and Reference Terms, CDC, 2007.

www.cdc.gov/nphsp/PDF/Glossary.pdf.

Capacity

The ability to perform the core public health functions of assessment, policy development and assurance on a continuous, consistent basis, made possible by maintenance of the basic infrastructure of the public health system, including human, capital and technology resources.

CDC

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is part of the Department of Health and Human Services. It provides federal leadership and funding in the prevention and control of diseases.

Chronic disease

A disease that has one or more of the following characteristics: it is permanent, leaves residual disability, is caused by a nonreversible pathological alteration, requires special training of the patient for rehabilitation, or may be expected to require a long period of supervision, observation or care. Communicable disease data This category includes diseases that are usually transmitted through person-to-person contact or shared use of contaminated instruments/materials. Many of these diseases can be prevented through the use of protective measures, such as a high level of vaccine coverage of vulnerable populations.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR)

A collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community, and has the aim of combining knowledge with action and achieving social change to improve health outcomes and eliminate health disparities.

Community health assessment (CHA)

Community health assessment calls for regularly and systematically collecting, analyzing, and making available information on the health of a community, including statistics on health status, community health needs, epidemiologic and other studies of health problems. Often this can take the form of community needs assessments, which are intended to assist the community in adapting and responding to important health problems and risks. Increasingly, moving beyond problems and deficits toward an analysis of community strengths and resources is becoming recognized as a critical part of understanding a community's health. Conducting a community health assessment is required for local public health agencies.

Community health improvement (CHIP)

Focuses on the combined effects of individual and community, physical and social environments, and the policies and interventions used to promote health, prevent disease, and ensure access to quality health care. The ultimate measure of success in any health improvement effort is the health status of the target population. Implementing a community health improvement plan is required for local public health agencies.

Community health profile (CHP)

A comprehensive compilation of measures representing multiple categories, or domains, that contributes to a description of health status at a community level and the resources available to

address health needs. Measures within each domain may be tracked over time to determine trends, to evaluate health interventions or policy decisions, to compare community data with peer, state, national or benchmark measures, and to establish priorities through an informed community process.

Continuous quality improvement

An ongoing effort to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, quality, or performance of services, processes, capacities, outcomes. These efforts can seek “incremental” improvement over time or “breakthrough” improvement all at once. Among the most widely used tools for continuous improvement is a four-step quality model, the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle.

Cultural competence A set of skills that result in an individual understanding and appreciating cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups and individuals. This competence requires that the individual draw on the community-based values, traditions, and customs to work with knowledgeable persons of and from the community in developing targeted interventions and communications.

Death, illness, and/or injury data

Health status in a community is measured in terms of mortality (rates of death within a population) and morbidity (rates of the incidence and prevalence of disease). Mortality may be represented by crude rates or age-adjusted rates (AAM); by degree of premature death (Years of Productive Life Lost or YPLL); and by cause (disease - cancer and non-cancer or injury - intentional, unintentional). Morbidity may be represented by age-adjusted (AA) incidence of cancer and chronic disease.

Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics of a jurisdiction include measures of total population as well as percent of total population by age group, gender, race and ethnicity, where these populations and subpopulations are located, and the rate of change in population density over time, due to births, deaths and migration patterns.

Determinants of health

Direct causes and risk factors which, based on scientific evidence or theory, are thought to influence directly the level of a specific health problem. These may be defined as the “upstream” factors that affect the health status of populations and individuals. Roughly divided into the social environment (cultural, political, policy, economic systems, social capital, etc.), the physical environment (natural and built), and genetic endowment. The determinants of health affect both individual response (behavior and biology) and the prevalence of illness and disease.

Disease

A state of dysfunction of organs or organ systems that can result in diminished quality of life.

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

Emergency Medical Services focuses on ensuring a functioning emergency care system. This includes licensing paramedics and emergency medical technicians, approving the training curriculum and licensing EMS instructors, ensuring ambulances are safe and well-equipped, and ensuring that every community has access to emergency care-from first responders through to a sophisticated trauma center. Endemic Prevalent in or peculiar to a particular locality or people.

Environmental Factor

An environmental factor is an extrinsic factor (e.g., geology, climate, insects, sanitation, health services, etc.) that affects the agent and the opportunity for exposure.

Environmental hazards

Situations or materials that pose a threat to human health and safety in the built or natural environment, as well as to the health and safety of other animals and plants, and to the proper functioning of an ecosystem, habitat, or other natural resource.

Environmental health

The interrelationships between people and their environment that promote human health and well-being and foster a safe and healthful environment. Environmental health includes all aspects of human health and quality of life that are determined by physical, chemical, biological, social, and psychosocial factors in the environment.

Environmental justice

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, income or education level for the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Environmental justice seeks to ensure that no population is forced to shoulder a disproportionate burden of the negative human health and environmental impacts of pollution or other environmental hazards.

Epidemic

A group of cases of a specific disease or illness clearly in excess of what one would normally expect in a particular geographic area.

Epidemiology

Epidemiology is the study of the distribution and determinants of health-related states or events in specified populations, and the application of this study to the control of health problems. Epidemiology is concerned with the frequencies and types of illnesses and injuries in groups of people and with the factors that influence their distribution.

Essential Public Health Services

The ten services identified in Public Health in America: monitoring health status; diagnosing and investigating health problems; informing, educating, and empowering people; mobilizing community partnerships; developing policies and plans; enforcing laws and regulations; linking people to needed services; assuring a competent workforce; conducting evaluations; and

conducting research. Representatives from federal agencies and national organizations developed the statement made in Public Health in America. This statement includes two lists, one that describes what public health seeks to accomplish and the second that describes how it will carry out its basic responsibilities. The second list, the Essential Services, provides a list of 10 public health services that define the practice of public health.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a process that attempts to determine as systematically and objectively as possible the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of activities in the light of their objectives. Evaluation identifies what should or could be done to address a health problem, and how it can be done.

Evidence

In the broadest sense, evidence can be defined as facts or testimony in support of a conclusion, statement or belief and something serving as proof.

Foodborne illness

Illness caused by the transfer of disease organisms or toxins from food to humans.

Health indicator

A health indicator is a measure that reflects, or indicates, the state of health in a defined population, such as the infant mortality rate.

Health promotion

Health promotion means the process of enabling people to increase control over and to improve their health.

Health risk

A condition of humans that can be represented in terms of measurable health status or quality-of-life indicators.

Health status

The current state of a given population using a variety of indices, including morbidity, mortality, and available health resources.

Incidence

Incidence (incidence rate) is the number of new events (for example, new cases of a disease) in a defined population, occurring within a specified period of time. See related prevalence.

Indicator

In public health terms, an indicator variable helps to measure changes directly or indirectly. It also makes it possible to assess the success of a program's efforts in achieving its goals. In medicine, indicators help to measure changes in the health situation of a given population (e.g., the elderly).

Infant Mortality

Rate A death rate calculated by dividing the number of infant deaths during a calendar year by the number of live births reported in the same year. It is expressed as the number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births.

Infectious

Capable of causing infection or disease by entrance of organisms (e.g., bacteria, viruses, protozoan, fungi) into the body, which then grow and multiply. Often used synonymously with “communicable”.

Infectious diseases

A disease caused by a living organism. An infectious disease may, or may not, be transmissible from person to person, animal to person, or insect to person.

Infrastructure

The systems, competencies, relationships, and resources that enable performance of public health’s core functions and essential services in every community. Categories include human, organizational, informational, and fiscal resources.

Injury

Injuries can be classified by the intent or purposefulness of occurrence in two categories, intentional and unintentional injuries. Intentional injuries are ones that are purposely inflicted and often associated with violence. These include child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, aggravated assault, homicide, and suicide. Unintentional injuries include only those injuries that occur without intent of harm and are not purposely inflicted.

Injury prevention

Injury prevention strategies focus primarily on environmental design (e.g., road construction that permits optimum visibility), product design, human behavior, education and legislative and regulatory requirements that support environmental and behavioral change.

Intervention

An intervention is the act of interfering with a condition to modify it or with a process to change its course. A public health intervention can be defined by the fact that it is applied to many, most, or all members in a community, with the aim of delivering a net benefit to the community or population as well as benefits to individuals. Public health interventions include policies of governments and non-government organizations; laws and regulations; organizational development; community development; education of individuals and communities; engineering and technical developments; service development and delivery; and communication, including social marketing.

Local health department or Local Public Health Agency (LPHA)

An administrative or service unit of local government concerned with health and carrying some responsibility for the health of a jurisdiction smaller than the state; the governmental public

health presence at the local level, which may be a locally governed health department, a branch of the state health department, a state-created district or region, a department governed by and serving a multi-county area, or any other arrangement that has governmental authority and is responsible for public health functions at the local level.

Morbidity

Illness or lack of health caused by disease, disability, or injury.

Mortality

A measure of the incidence of deaths in a population.

Outbreak

An outbreak is the occurrence of more cases of disease than would normally be expected in a specific place or group of people over a given period of time.

Population-based health

Interventions aimed at disease prevention and health promotion that affect an entire population and extend beyond medical treatment by targeting underlying risks, such as tobacco, drug, and alcohol use; diet and sedentary lifestyles; and environmental factors.

Prevalence

Prevalence is the proportion of people in a population who have some attribute or condition at a given point in time or during a specified time period.

Prevention

In public health terms, prevention means actions that reduce exposure or other risks, keep people from getting sick, or keep disease from getting worse.

Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB)

PHAB is the national accrediting organization for public health departments. A nonprofit organization, PHAB is dedicated to advancing the continuous quality improvement of Tribal, state, local, and territorial public health departments. PHAB is working to promote and protect the health of the public by advancing the quality and performance of all public health departments in the United States through national public health department accreditation.

Public health emergency

An occurrence or imminent threat of an illness or health condition, caused by bioterrorism, epidemic or pandemic disease, or novel and highly infectious agent or biological toxin, that poses a substantial risk of a significant number of human fatalities or incidents of permanent or long term disability. Such illness or health condition includes, but is not limited to, an illness or health condition resulting from a natural disaster.

Public health laboratory

A scientific research facility with the equipment and staff needed to conduct ongoing public health assessments and to respond to emergency public health issues.

Public health system

All public, private, and voluntary entities that contribute to the delivery of essential public health services within a jurisdiction. These systems are a network of entities with differing roles, relationships, and interactions that contribute to the health and well-being of the community or state.

Public health workforce

All persons engaged during a significant part of the time in work that creates the conditions within which people can be healthy. Composed of those who work for official public health agencies at all levels of government, community-based and voluntary organizations with a health promotion focus, the public health-related staff of hospitals and health care systems, and a range of others in private industry, government, and the voluntary sector.

Quality of life

In public health terms, quality of life means the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as able to function physically, emotionally and socially. In a general sense, it is that which makes life worth living. In a more quantitative sense, it refers to a person's time remaining alive, free of impairment, disability, or handicap.

Quarantine

The compulsory physical separation or confinement of individuals and/or groups, animals, or the enforced restraint of transport of goods in order to prevent or limit the spread of disease or disease vectors.

Rate

A measure of the intensity of the occurrence of an event. For example, the mortality rate equals the number who die in one year divided by the number at risk of dying. Rates usually are expressed using a standard denominator such as 1,000 or 100,000 people.

Reportable disease(s)

Health conditions that are required through statute, ordinance or administrative rule to be reported to a public health agency when it is diagnosed in an individual.

Risk Assessment

The scientific process of evaluating adverse effects caused by a substance, activity, lifestyle, or natural phenomenon. Risk assessment is the means by which currently available information about public health problems arising in the environment is organized and understood.

Risk factor

Personal qualities or societal conditions that lead to the increased probability of a problem or problems developing.

Risk management

The goal of risk management is to direct limited available resources to those areas and strategies where the greatest amount of risk can be reduced for the least amount of resources. In that “greatest risk” can be defined in a number of different ways, it is a value laden process.

Safety-net provider(s)

Individuals and organizations that provide healthcare to low-income and other vulnerable populations, including the uninsured and those covered by Medicaid. Major safety net providers include public hospitals and community health centers as well as teaching and community hospitals, private physicians, and other providers who deliver a substantial amount of care to these populations.

Sanitary code

A regulation concerned with food safety as well as the design, construction, and maintenance of environmental facilities conducive to public health, such as water supply and waste disposal. Screening The use of technology and procedures to differentiate those individuals with signs or symptoms of disease from those less likely to have the disease.

Social capital

Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions.

Social norm

Expectations about behavior, thoughts or feelings that are appropriate and sanctioned within a particular society. Social norms can play a powerful role in the health status of individuals.

Socioeconomic characteristics

Socioeconomic characteristics include measures that have been shown to affect health status, such as income, education, and employment, and the proportion of the population represented by various levels of these variables.

State health improvement plan

A state health improvement process is a collaborative effort to identify, analyze, and address health problems in a state; assess applicable data; develop measurable health objectives and indicators; inventory statewide health assets and resources; develop and implement coordinated strategies; identify accountable entities; and cultivate state public health system “ownership” of the entire process. The results of the state health improvement process are contained in a written document, the state health improvement plan.

Vectors

Used in terms of public health it refers to animals or other living organisms that carry or transmit diseases (e.g., rats, mosquitoes, foxes).

Vector control

Programs designed to reduce or eliminate a disease-carrying insect or rodent population (e.g. mosquito control programs).

Vital events

Live births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages, divorces, and induced terminations of pregnancy, together with any change in civil status that may occur during an individual's lifetime.

Vital statistics

Data derived from certificates and reports of birth, death, fetal death, induced termination of pregnancy, marriage, (divorce, dissolution of marriage, or annulment) and related reports.

Years of potential life lost (YPLL)

A measure of premature death, or death that occurs before age 75, which is the average life span. This measure is useful for assessing the impact of a particular public health problem on the economy in terms of lost work years and earnings, and on family life in terms of impact on surviving spouses and children. It should be noted that a large percentage of the causes of YPLL are preventable through behavior modification, lifestyle changes, and substance abuse reduction.