

# 4 Making People Healthy: General Determinants

## Learning Objectives

---

- Investigate what makes people healthy
- Summarize and categorize the determinants of health using a variety of models
- Distinguish between personal and structural determinants of health
- Outline how the Lalonde report conceptualized the determinants of health
- Compare the relative importance of health determinants
- Describe how physical and social environments shape health outcomes across the life course
- Critique models of the determinants of health that focus only on the determinants of ill

## Summary

---

Whereas an individualized health promotion model sees health in relation to personal practices—whether one smokes or consumes excessive amounts of alcohol—critical health sociologists see health as an outcome of social determinants (income, location, age, education etc.). Antonovsky's salutogenic model of health works well with the social determinants perspective as it understands health not only as an individual problem but also a societal one.

The determinants of health that influence population health can be categorized as structural factors, such as socioeconomic status, education, gender, employment, and personal factors, such as coping skills and lifestyles. Structural and personal factors are not separate but rather interact with one another, making it difficult to isolate their respective effects on health.

In 1974, the Lalonde report grouped the determinants of health into four key areas, and these groupings are still often used today. They are:

- human biology: genetic predisposition
- lifestyle: personal health practices such as smoking and exercising
- environment:
  - physical environment: what we drink, the air we breathe and our exposure to pollution and the built environment
  - social environment: age structure, gender structure, employment and working conditions
- health care: access to physician and hospital care

The chapter considers how each of these factors shapes patterns of health and disease and introduces some of the concepts used in each of these lines of research.

A life course approach is particularly helpful in understanding the determinants of health, as its focus is on every stage of an individual's development from birth to death. In so doing, it is easier to link illness (lung cancer) to events that occurred decades earlier (being a firefighter on 9/11).

There are different models that have been proposed to categorize and prioritize the various determinants of health in terms of how far up the causal chain their influence is. Segall and Fries review these models (e.g. primary vs. secondary determinants or horizontal vs. vertical structures) and demonstrate the difficulty and challenges associated with trying to rank the relative importance of particular health determinants.

## Key Concepts/Terms

---

**Age stratification:** The unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege among people at different stages in the life course (p. 116).

**Age structure:** A demographic term used to describe the age composition of a population (p. 116).

**Built environment:** Aspects of the physical environment that affect health, such as housing and the design of cities (p. 110).

**Emotional support:** Supportive social relationships that contribute to feelings of being cared for and valued, which help us feel part of a meaningful network or group of people (p. 118).

**Horizontal structures:** Immediate factors that have a direct impact on health such as family environments, the nature of work and workplace conditions, quality of housing and the availability of neighbourhood resources (p. 122).

**Informational support:** Supportive social relationships that are an important source of information about health-related matters (p. 118).

**Instrumental support:** Supportive social relationships that provide individuals with practical assistance with the activities of daily living (p. 118).

**Lalonde Report:** Influential 1974 report that categorized the health determinants into four areas: biology, lifestyle, environment and health care (p. 106).

**Natural environment:** Aspects of the physical environment that affect health, such as air and water quality (p. 110).

**Pathogenesis** The origins of disease as defined by biomedicine (p. 103).

**Personal determinants:** Factors specific to the individual that exert an internal influence on health, such as genetic makeup, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioural practices (p. 104).

**Population aging:** A trend whereby the proportion of people over the age of 65 is expected to accelerate in the future (p. 115).

**Primary determinants:** Factors that have a direct effect on health, such as household income, education level, and employment status (p. 122).

**Salutogenesis:** The origins of good health (p. 103).

**Secondary determinants:** Factors that reflect our living and working conditions and play an important intervening role between social status and health status, such as daily behavioural practices and psychosocial well-being (p. 122).

**Structural determinants:** Factors evident at the societal level that exert an external influence on health, including aspects of social and economic environments such as income distribution, rates of unemployment, living and working conditions, and the organization of health care (p. 104).

**Urban health penalty:** The finding that those who live in urban centres have worse health than those who live in rural areas (p. 111).

**Vertical structures:** Distant, macro-level factors that indirectly influence health, such as social, political, and economic policies regarding social welfare or taxation; e.g., child tax benefits (p.122).

## Study Questions

---

1. What are the social determinants of health? Explain the relationship between personal and structural determinants of health.
2. What is the key difference between pathogenesis and salutogenesis?
3. What factors did McKeown see as responsible for increases in life expectancy in the late 19th and early 20th century? How did the Lalonde report frame the determinants of health?
4. How do researchers conceptualize the physical environment in sociological health research?
5. What effect does living in an urban area have on one's health?
6. How might the changing age structure of Canadian population influence the health of our population?
7. How does social support improve health?
8. How does education status improve health?
9. What is health literacy?
10. Has the use of formal health care resulted in improvements in population health?
11. What is the difference between risk factors and salutary factors?

## Explore and Discuss Questions

---

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of healthy lifestyle campaigns like the ParticipACTION program run in Canada since the 1970s?
2. The most critical investment a society can make in its health is funding public education. Debate.
3. What is the relationship between unemployment and ill-health? Which forms of social support are most important to your health? Why?
4. Describe two models used to distinguish between the relative importance of various determinants of health.
5. Why should we distinguish between determinants of good health and ill health?

## Further Exploration

---

Carson, Rachel. 1962. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Guhn, M., M. Janes, J. Enns et.al. 2016. Examining the social determinants of children's developmental health: protocol for building a pan-Canadian population-based monitoring system for early childhood development. *BMJ Open* 6(4), e012020.

National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. 2011. *Integrating Social Determinants of Health Equity into Canadian Public Health Practice*.

[http://nccdh.ca/images/uploads/comments/Environ\\_Report\\_EN\\_150604.pdf](http://nccdh.ca/images/uploads/comments/Environ_Report_EN_150604.pdf)

Raphael, D., J. Brassolotto and N. Baldeo. 2016. Ideological and organizational components of differing public health strategies for addressing the social determinants of health. *Health Promotion International*, 30(4), 855-867.

Ruckert, A. and R. Labonte. 2016. The first federal budget under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: Addressing social determinants of health? *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 107(2), E212-E214.

Steingraber, Sandra. 1998. *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*. New York: Vintage Books.

Schlosser, Eric. 2002. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York: Perennial.

Tesh, S. 1990. *Hidden Arguments: Political Ideology and Disease Prevention Policy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

## Recommended Films

---

### 1. **“Tipping Point: The Age of the Oil Sands” in *The Nature of Things***

This two-hour episode documents the groundbreaking research of Dr. David Schindler that discovered higher-than-expected levels of toxins, including arsenic, lead, and mercury in waters flowing through the oil sands.

- <http://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/episodes/tipping-point>

## 2. **House Calls**

This 2006 documentary follows Mark Nowaczynski, a Toronto physician and photographer who makes house calls to elderly patients unable to travel to a clinic or doctor's office.

- <http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/en/our-collection/?idfilm=51478>

## 3. **Blue Vinyl**

A documentary (2002) directed by Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand. With a lighthearted tone, the film follows one woman's quest for an environmentally sound cladding for her parents' house in Merrick, Long Island, New York. It also investigates the many negative health effects of polyvinyl chloride in its production, use and disposal, focusing on the communities of Lake Charles and Mossville, Louisiana, and Venice, Italy.

- [www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=51478](http://www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=51478)

## Recommended Websites

---

### 1. **Health Canada: Seniors**

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/seniors-aines/index-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/seniors-aines/index-eng.php)

### 2. **Aging and Seniors—Publications, Public Health Agency of Canada**

[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/)

### 3. **Gender and Health, Collaborative Curriculum Project**

[www.genderandhealth.ca/en/modules/](http://www.genderandhealth.ca/en/modules/)