



Glossary of Common Public Health Terms

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These common public health definitions were adapted from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization.

Behavioral Risk Factors

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.

Chronic Disease

A condition that lasts at least one year and requires ongoing medical attention, limits activities of daily living, or both.

Endemic

The constant or usual prevalence of a disease or infectious agent in a population within a geographic area. A disease that is usually endemic can become an epidemic.

Epidemic

An increase, often sudden, in the number of cases of a disease, above what is normally expected in a specific population in an area. Seasonal flu, for example, can appear as an epidemic.

Epidemiology

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. It is concerned with the frequencies and types of illnesses and injuries in groups of people and with the factors that influence their distribution.

Health Disparities

The occurrence of diseases at greater levels among certain population groups more than others.

Health Equity

The attainment of the highest level of health for all people. Achieving this state requires valuing everyone equally with a focus on the elimination of health disparities.

Health Inequities

Systematic differences in the health status of different population groups. These inequities have significant social and economic costs both to individuals and societies.

Incidence (Incidence Rate)

The number of new events (e.g., new cases of a disease) in a defined population, occurring within a specified period of time.

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Morbidity

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

Mortality

Another term for death.

Outbreak

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. It is often used for a more limited geographic area than an epidemic (e.g., a school, a town, people attending an event).

Pandemic

An epidemic that has spread over several countries or continents, usually affecting a large number of people (e.g., SARS-CoV-2).

Prevalence (Prevalence Rate)

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. It is often expressed as a rate (e.g., the prevalence of diabetes per 1,000 people during a year).

Public Health

The prevention of injury, disease, and premature mortality; the promotion of health in the community; and the response to public and environmental health needs and emergencies in the community.

Public Health Emergency

An occurrence or imminent threat of an illness or health condition caused by bioterrorism, epidemic or pandemic disease, a novel and highly infectious agent or biological toxin, or a natural disaster that poses a substantial risk of a significant number of human fatalities or incidents of permanent or long-term disability.

Public Health Surveillance

The continuous and systematic collection, orderly consolidation, and evaluation of pertinent data with prompt dissemination of results so that public health agencies can take action.

Social Determinants of Health

The [nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes](#). They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, worship, and age. These conditions include a wide set of forces and systems that shape daily life, such as economic policies and systems, social norms, social policies, and political systems.

Vector

An animal or other living organism that carries or transmits diseases (e.g., rats, mosquitoes, bats).

Vital Statistics

Data derived from certificates and reports of birth, death, and marriage, generally recorded by the government.