

PUBLIC HEALTH

What is Public Health?

Each individual has a concept of what constitutes public health and these concepts vary based on the background experience, training, and education of the individual. The following is an attempt to present one concept of public health that can be accepted by most of those individuals engaged in some aspect of public health practice.

Public Health as a discipline or science is concerned with the health and well-being of the general public. It approaches health in a general way, without regard to the circumstances or limitations under which health is studied, investigated, or measured. In order to define public health, an acceptable definition of "health" is necessary. Rather than explore the various ways that health has been defined; the following definition is proposed for this presentation.

"Health is a measure of one's ability to respond favorably to insults. Insults are defined as any event or agent, biological, physical, chemical, mental, social, or cultural, that confronts and has an impact on an individual and to which he or she must respond."

Understanding the variety of factors that have an impact on health helps direct the public health worker to develop the measures needed to prevent or control disease and to maintain reasonably good health for members of the general population or community as appropriate. An event is a happening that, in the case of health, affects an individual, a group, or population. It could be a meeting, a concert, a traffic accident, a tornado, etc. An agent is an entity, usually biological, such as a disease organism (virus, bacterium, parasite).

The variety of factors to be considered in determining the measures most appropriate to apply in any public health situation includes the following assemblage. Ethnicity, religion, economic status, and language combined to establish the culture of individuals and groups of people. The level and type of education and training establish thinking patterns. The environment in which people live and the food people eat and how they prepare it impact on the chemicals, agents, and other things to which they are exposed. Each of these factors, and perhaps others, impact on the type of insults to which individuals and groups are exposed and their resulting level of health.

Public Health in practice is then, the approaches that are taken to insure the health and well-being of individuals and groups based on an assessment of the contributing factors and their interplay with the general population.