

## Determinants of health

One way of understanding determinants of health is to consider the effect people's environments have on their well-being. Physical and social environments are key determinants of health along with biology, health behavior, access to quality health care, public policies and public health interventions.

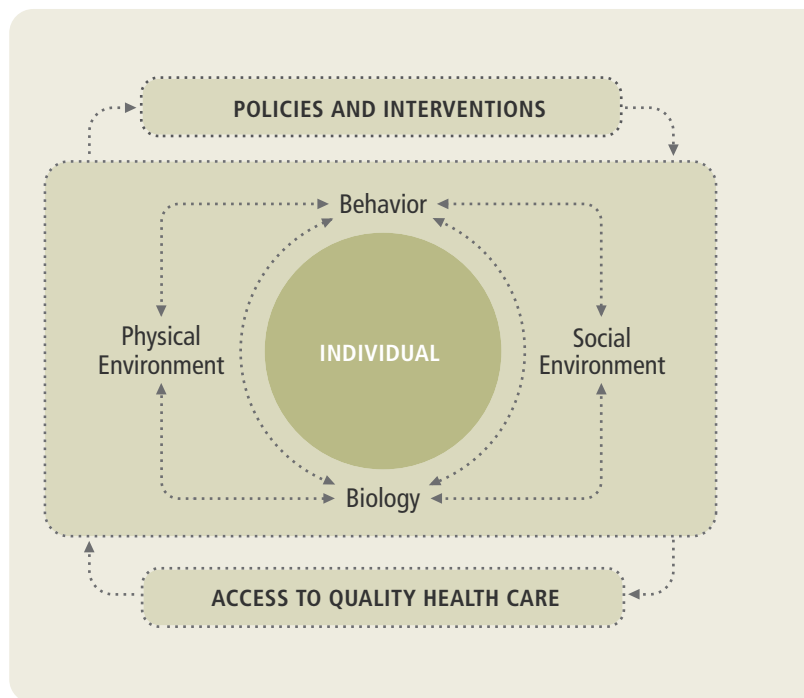
Social environment encompasses social and economic factors such as income, education, employment status, working conditions, social networks and community cohesion. Physical environment includes the natural environment (e.g., clean air, water, soil), the built environment (e.g., land use, zoning, community design), and living conditions such as safe and affordable housing, transportation and nutritious foods.

Healthy People 2010 is an initiative managed by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It promotes health objectives for the nation to achieve over the first decade of the new century, which can be used by states, communities, professional organizations and others to help develop programs to improve health.

Topics covered by the objectives in Healthy People 2010 reflect the array of critical influences that determine the health of individuals and communities. Individual biology and behaviors

influence health through their interaction with each other and with the individual's social and physical environments. In addition, policies and interventions can improve health by targeting key factors such as access to quality health care. The following chart from Healthy People 2010 illustrates the interaction of these factors.

FIGURE 1. Determinants of Health



Source: Healthy People 2010; [www.healthypeople.gov](http://www.healthypeople.gov)

## Social environment and health

The link between social, economic and environmental determinants of health and health outcomes at the community level has been a major topic of study as part of the Community Guide to Preventive Services.

The Community Guide was developed by the Task Force on Community Preventive Services. The Task Force is an independent group convened in 1996 by the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Community Guide’s model, shown below, shows that access to societal resources determines community health outcomes. Standard of living, culture and history, social institutions, built environments, political structures, economic systems and technology are all societal resources that a population draws upon to sustain health. Patterns of exposure to health risk vary among socioeconomic groups and are associated with fundamental access to resources.

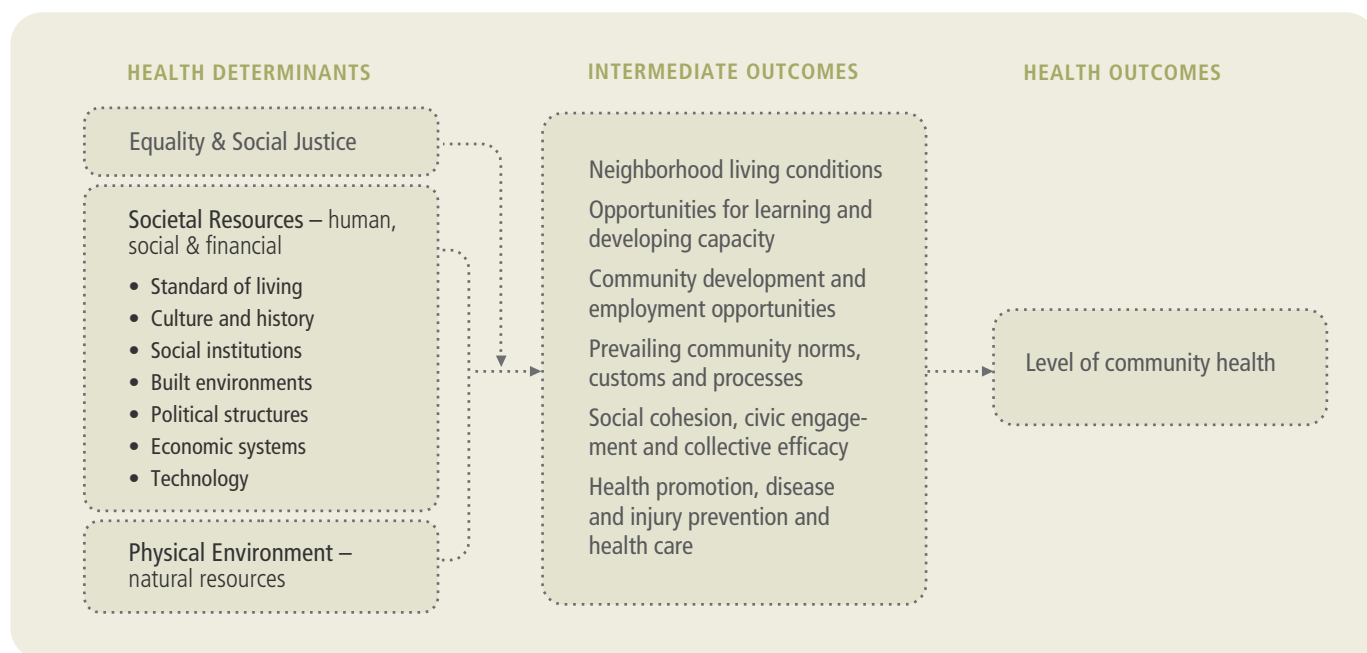
Poverty powerfully influences health status. An

impoverished social environment is a potential source of stressors (e.g., high-crime neighborhood or job scarcity). Higher socioeconomic status provides resources, such as knowledge, money, power, and prestige, which can be used to avoid or buffer exposure to health risks.

The degree to which equity and social justice exist in a society is reflected in the distribution of resources within the population. Macroeconomic research shows us that, in addition to economic prosperity, greater equality in the distribution of wealth is a characteristic of societies that improves average population health status and reduces health disparities.

The following framework identifies important intermediate outcomes that illustrate the multiple paths through which health is affected in the social environment.

FIGURE 2. Social Environment and Health Logic Framework

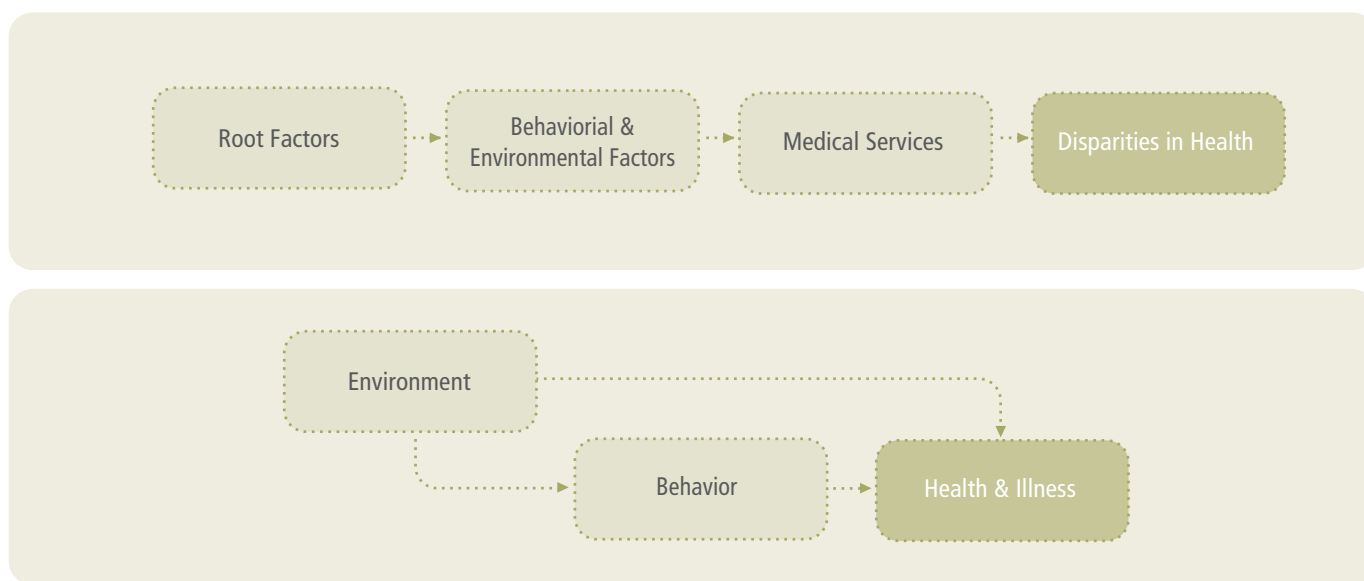


## Understanding critical pathways to health

An analysis of underlying causes of medical conditions reveals a trajectory to poor health outcomes leading to health disparities. Nearly 70 percent of premature deaths — and the impaired quality of life that frequently precedes them — are preventable because they are attributable to environmental and behavioral factors (Healthy People 2010). The frequency and severity of injury and illness is not inevitable.

The following diagram from The Prevention Institute of Oakland, Calif., delineates the pathways by which root factors, such as oppression and discrimination shape the physical and social environment, limit access to quality medical care and treatment, and increase rates of illness, disability and death. Actions are needed at each stage to eliminate health disparities.

FIGURE 3. Critical Pathways



source: [www.preventioninstitute.org](http://www.preventioninstitute.org)

# Blue Cross addresses the continuum of health

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and its family of companies provide programs and insurance products that address health needs ranging from prevention and screening to treatment and disease management.

As the philanthropic arm of Blue Cross, our foundation has a unique leadership opportunity to

focus our grantmaking, partnerships and policy interests “upstream” on the social, economic and environmental determinants of health, which are beyond the reach of the traditional health care system. Together these efforts contribute to a healthy Minnesota.

FIGURE 4. Continuum of Health

