

## Public Health: “Healthy People in Healthy Communities”

*In just 50 years, public health has made significant—even revolutionary—strides in the fulfillment of its mission to “promote physical and mental health and prevent disease, injury, and disability.”*

**M**oving beyond the sole task of identifying pathogens that can be contained in a test tube and treating them with the contents of another test tube, public health now also identifies the elusive patterns and origins of human behaviors that so frequently result in adverse health consequences. Then it designs real-world interventions that respond to the complexities of the human condition to enable individuals to be involved in preventing disease, injury, and disability. The public’s susceptibility to newly emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria also involve complex behavioral and environmental factors.

Today, in order to accomplish its mission, public health needs to be able to proactively identify and address health problems while also being capable of reacting to and addressing new and unanticipated health issues. Public health does this by:

- Preventing epidemics and the spread of disease
- Protecting against environmental hazards
- Preventing injuries
- Promoting and encouraging healthy behaviors
- Responding to disasters and assisting communities in recovery
- Assuring the quality and accessibility of health services

Lists of causes of death typically begin with heart disease and stroke, cancers, and accidents, providing more than enough evidence to suggest that these are true public health problems. When we look at the “real

causes” of death in this country, nearly half of all deaths are due to the following:

1. Tobacco
2. Diet/physical activity patterns
3. Alcohol
4. Microbial agents
5. Toxic agents
6. Firearms
7. Sexual behavior
8. Motor vehicles
9. Illicit use of drugs

This list contains seven “causes” related to personal behaviors, education, and the environment, indicating that social support and policy development are priority tasks to be achieved so that public health can fulfill its mission.

In a society where infectious diseases such as smallpox and polio have virtually no meaning to our children because we committed the necessary resources to eradicate them, we now are faced with chronic diseases—heart disease and stroke, cancer, and diabetes, among others—that are this generation’s public health challenge. How we invest our resources today will determine whether our grandchildren know what the term “chronic diseases” means.

### References

McGinnis JM, Foege WH. Actual causes of death in the United States. *J Amer Med Assoc* 1993; 270:2207-2212.

Public Health Functions Steering Committee. *Public Health in America*. 1994. [Members include the American Public Health Association, Association of Schools of Public Health, Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, Environmental Council of the States, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors, National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, Public Health Foundation, and U.S. Public Health Service.]