

What is Health Equity?

Health equity discussions have gained much attention in public health. Many new and continuing efforts focus on health equity, sometimes with confusion around terminology. This document provides a set of definitions¹ to clarify and advance the discussion of health equity in public health.

Health, as defined by the World Health Organization, is *a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*. The dictionary definition of equity is *the quality of being fair or impartial*. Fairness demands that everyone have the opportunity to reach their full health potential.

Achieving health equity requires valuing everyone with focused and ongoing societal efforts to address avoidable inequalities, historical and contemporary injustices, and the elimination of health disparities and health care disparities.

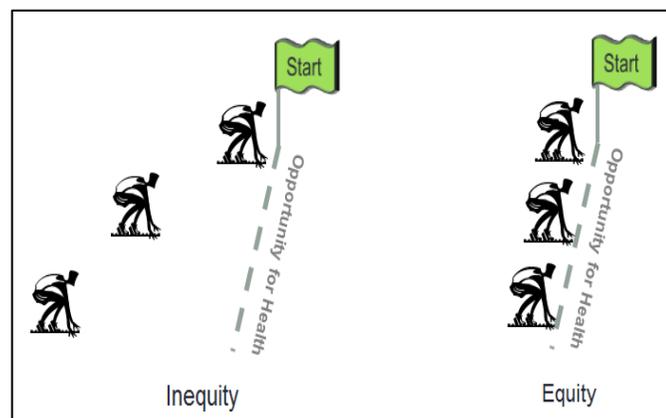
Health equity, therefore, is the attainment of the highest level of health possible for all people.

A **health inequity** is a difference in health status between more and less socially and economically advantaged groups, caused by systemic differences in social conditions and processes that effectively determine health. Health inequities are avoidable, unjust and therefore actionable.



Health equity and health disparities are closely related issues (see additional definitions on the back of this page). But a conversation about disparities is about *differences*, whereas a conversation about equity is about *values*. For example:

- Downhill skiers have more orthopedic issues than non-skiers, but we don't consider that to be unfair.
- Men have more prostate cancer than women, but we don't consider that to be unfair either.
- However, African American men get (and die more often from) prostate cancer than White men, in part for economic and social reasons, and that is unfair: that is a health inequity.



¹ These definitions have been established as working definitions by the Minnesota Department of Health Executive Leadership Team. They may also be found in the SHIP *Health Equity Implementation Guide FY2014-2015*, http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthreform/ship/2013rfp/docs/HEq-implementation_SHIP3.pdf

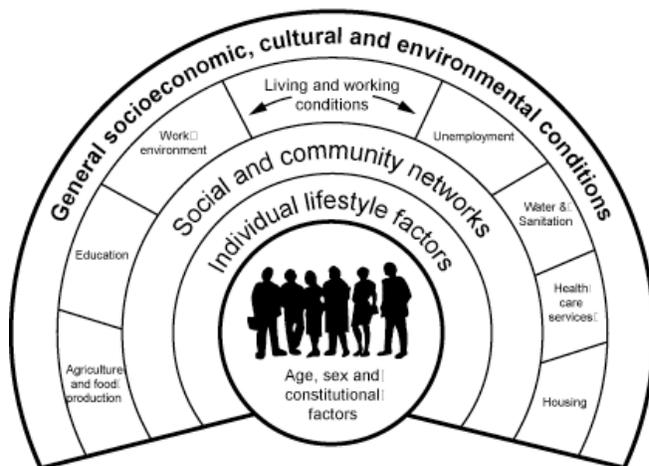
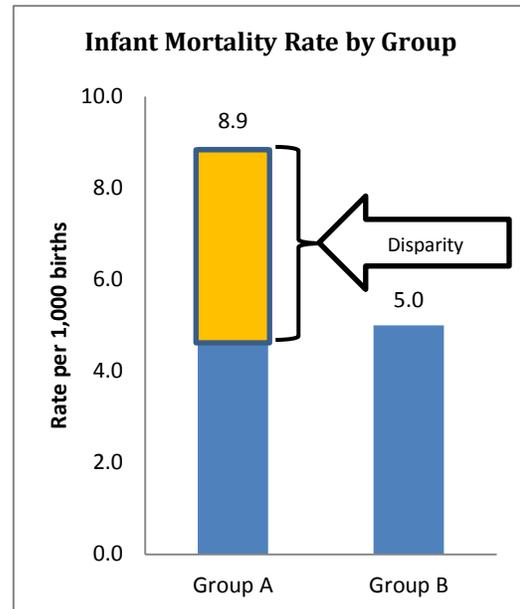
Additional key terms:

Health disparities:² Differences in the incidence, prevalence, mortality and burden of disease and other adverse health conditions that exist between specific population groups.

Populations experiencing health disparities: Populations experiencing health disparities are comprised of people with certain characteristics that cause them to be at greater risk of having poor health. Characteristics include age, race, culture, disability, gender, geographical location, immigrant status, race/ethnicity, refugee status, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation.

Determinants of health: the range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors that influence the health of individuals and populations.

Social determinants of health:³ Conditions, including life-enhancing resources, found in the physical, cultural, social, economic and political environments, which influence individual and population health. Inequities in distribution of these conditions lead to population-based differences in health outcomes (i.e., health disparities).



Social determinants of health include job opportunities, wages, transportation options, the quality of housing and neighborhoods, the food supply, access to health care, the quality of public schools and opportunities for higher education, racism and discrimination, civic engagement, and the availability of networks of social support.

Diagram: Dahlgren G, Whitehead M. Policies and strategies to promote social equity in health. Stockholm, 1

² Data on health disparities in Minnesota are detailed throughout *The Health of Minnesota: Statewide Health Assessment 2012*, <http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthymnpartnership/sha/>

³ A framework and strategy for creating health and advancing health equity that is based in an understanding of social determinants of health has been developed by the Healthy Minnesota Partnership: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/healthymnpartnership/hm2020/>