



1.1 What is health?

What does it mean when we say a person is 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'?

At a simple level, one can view the concept of health by focusing on the individual and on the presence, or absence, of disease and medically measured risk factors.

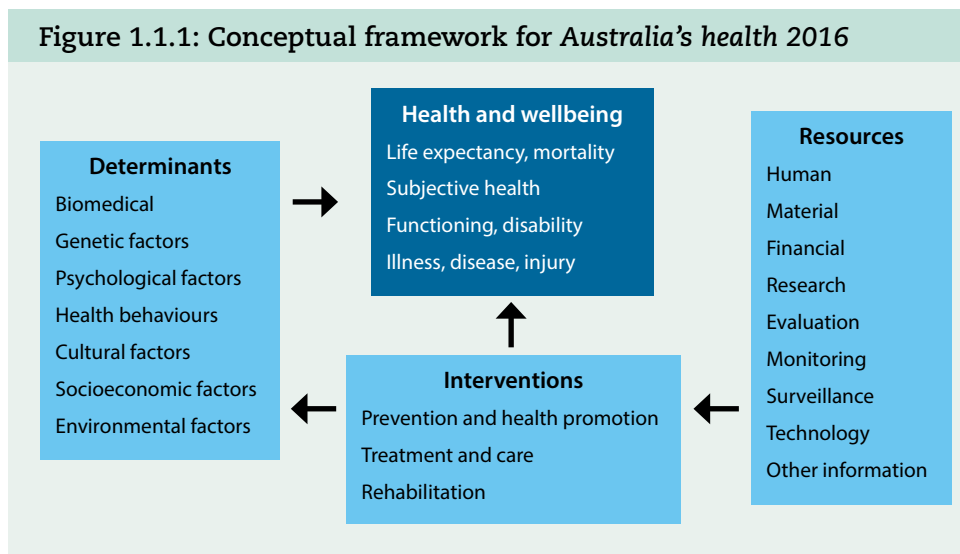
A broader and more widely accepted view sees health as multidimensional: defining health 'as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 1946).

This multidimensional model incorporates:

- genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors
- cultural influences
- socioeconomic conditions
- provision of, access to, and use of health care services and programs.

Australia's health 2016 takes this broader view of health and functioning—a conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1.1.1. This figure shows that a person's health and wellbeing depend on two general factors: 'determinants' (things that influence health) along with 'interventions' and the required resources (what can be done to improve a person's health).

Figure 1.1.1: Conceptual framework for Australia's health 2016



As this figure illustrates, a person's health and wellbeing result from a complex interplay between biological, lifestyle, socioeconomic, societal and environmental factors—many of which can be modified to some extent by health care and other interventions.

Many things can affect how healthy we are, ranging from the macro to the molecular: from society-wide influences (for example, the prevalence of drug and alcohol use), to highly individual factors such as genetic make-up. And, of course, our health can also be significantly affected by the quality and timeliness of the health care we receive, including preventive health care such as screening and immunisation (see 'Chapter 6.1 Prevention and health promotion').



Measures of health

There are many measures used to ascertain the health status of a person and a population. Box 1.1.1 explains some of the main measures that are featured throughout this report.

Box 1.1.1: Common measures of health

- **Life expectancy:** a measure of length of life. It is often expressed as either the number of years a newborn baby is expected to live, or as the expected number of years of life remaining for a person at a given age.
- **Mortality:** the number of deaths in a population in a given period.
- **Morbidity:** refers to ill health in an individual and to levels of ill health within a population or group.
 - **Comorbidity:** the occurrence of two or more diseases in a person at any one time.
 - **Incidence:** the number of new cases occurring in a given period. For example, in 2016, it is estimated that 130,500 new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in Australia.
 - **Prevalence:** the number or proportion of cases in a population at a given time. For example, at the end of 2009, the 5-year prevalence for all cancers was 370,474—that is, 370,474 people were alive who had been diagnosed with cancer in the previous 5 years.
- **Disability-adjusted life year (DALY):** a year of healthy life 'lost', either through dying early or through living with disability due to illness or injury. It combines the estimates of **years of life lost (YLL)**—which measures the years lost between the age at which a person dies and the number of years they could have potentially gone on to live—and **years lived with disability (YLD)**, to arrive at the total years of healthy life lost from living with disease and injury (see 'Chapter 3.1 Burden of disease and injury in Australia').
- **Self-assessed health status:** this measure is based on a person's own opinion about how they feel about their health, their state of mind and their life in general. It is commonly sourced from population surveys.

Determinants

As shown in Figure 1.1.1, a range of factors influence a person's health—from biomedical factors such as blood pressure, cholesterol levels and body weight, to behavioural factors such as smoking, alcohol consumption and exercise. Health can also be affected by social determinants: the social, economic, political, cultural and environmental 'conditions into which people are born, grow, live, work and age' (WHO 2015). For detailed discussion of these factors, see 'Chapter 4 Determinants of health'.



About Australia's health 2016

This report encompasses the ideas that health is an important part of how people feel and function; that it contributes to social and economic wellbeing; that there are degrees of good health as well as of bad health; that health can vary over time; and that health should be seen in a broad social context. To this end, *Australia's health 2016* examines health through a variety of different 'lenses', including the leading types of ill health that affect us as a nation; the burden of disease in the Australian population; specific risks and health inequalities faced by different groups within our population; the role of preventive health care; and the services that are provided to people in times of illness. It also provides an overarching view of how the health system functions.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on health definitions, social determinants of health, global health actions and data can be obtained from the [World Health Organization](http://www.who.int) website. See also 'Chapter 3.1 Burden of disease and injury in Australia'; 'Chapter 3.3 Chronic disease and comorbidities'; and 'Chapter 4.1 Social determinants of health'.

References

WHO (World Health Organization) 1946. Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19–22 June, 1946. New York: WHO.

WHO 2015. Social determinants of health. Geneva: WHO. Viewed 12 October 2015, <http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/>.