



## 1.1 What is health?

Health is a state of wellbeing. It reflects the complex interactions of a person's genetics, lifestyle and environment. Generally, a person's health depends on two things: determinants (factors that influence health) and interventions (actions taken to improve health, and the resources required for these interventions).

Some definitions view the health of an individual as the presence or absence of disease or medically measured risk factors. The World Health Organization's definition of health is broader and more multidimensional—namely, 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 1946).

Australians are generally seen to enjoy good health and to have an effective health system. How do we know this? We use the Australian Health Performance Framework to assess the health of our population and health system. It outlines health indicators that describe specific elements of our health or aspects of our health system's performance; it also compares data for different population groups, different geographic regions, and internationally. The Framework includes the domains of health status, determinants of health, and the health system (see Chapter 1.4 'Indicators of Australia's health').

### Measures of health status

Figure 1.1.1 outlines some of the more common measures of the health status of an individual and a population.

Figure 1.1.1: Common measures of health

Life expectancy	The number of years of life, on average, remaining to an individual at a particular age if death rates do not change. The most commonly used measure is life expectancy at birth.
Mortality	The number of deaths in a population in a given period.
Morbidity	Ill health in an individual and levels of ill health within a population (often expressed through incidence, prevalence and comorbidity measures—see Glossary).
Disability-adjusted life year (DALY)	One year of healthy life lost due to illness and/or death. DALYs are calculated as the sum of the years of life lost due to premature death and the years lived with disability for people living with the health condition or its consequences.
Health-adjusted life expectancy	The average length of time an individual at a specific age can expect to live in full health; that is, time lived without the health consequences of disease or injury.
Self-assessed health status	An individual's own opinion about how they feel about their health, their state of mind and their life in general.





These measures are useful to compare health outcomes across different populations as well as to look specifically at certain health conditions (see Chapter 3 for more information on health conditions; chapters 5 and 6 for more information on the health of population groups).

We glean many useful insights into the health of individuals and populations from health data. Information so gained can then be used to improve health and health services and to reduce health inequity across population groups.

## Impact of determinants

Health determinants are multifaceted, interrelated factors that influence health. Figure 1.1.2 divides them into four groups. The main direction of influence (as shown by the horizontal arrows) is from left to right; that is, from contextual factors (such as culture and affluence) through to more immediate influences (such as blood pressure). The importance of the broader social determinants of health—not only social, but also economic, political, cultural and environmental determinants—is becoming better understood. Essentially, these are the conditions into which people are born, grow, live, work and age (WHO 2015). At all stages along the path, the various factors shown in the four groups in Figure 1.1.2 interact with an individual's physical and psychological make-up. As well, the factors within each of these groups often interact with each other and are closely interrelated (see Chapter 4 for more information on determinants of health).

## Role of the health system

A major aim of any health system is to prevent disease and other ill health and injury and to maintain health—not just to treat illness—so that people remain as healthy as possible for as long as possible. This approach includes a focus on the quality and timeliness of health care received, including preventive health care such as screening and immunisation. However, as health is not merely the absence of disease, our health system also plays a vital role in positively influencing our health status by building social and physical environments that support health and promote healthy behaviours (see Chapter 7 for more information on prevention, treatment and health services).

### 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 website <[www.who.int](http://www.who.int)>.

### References

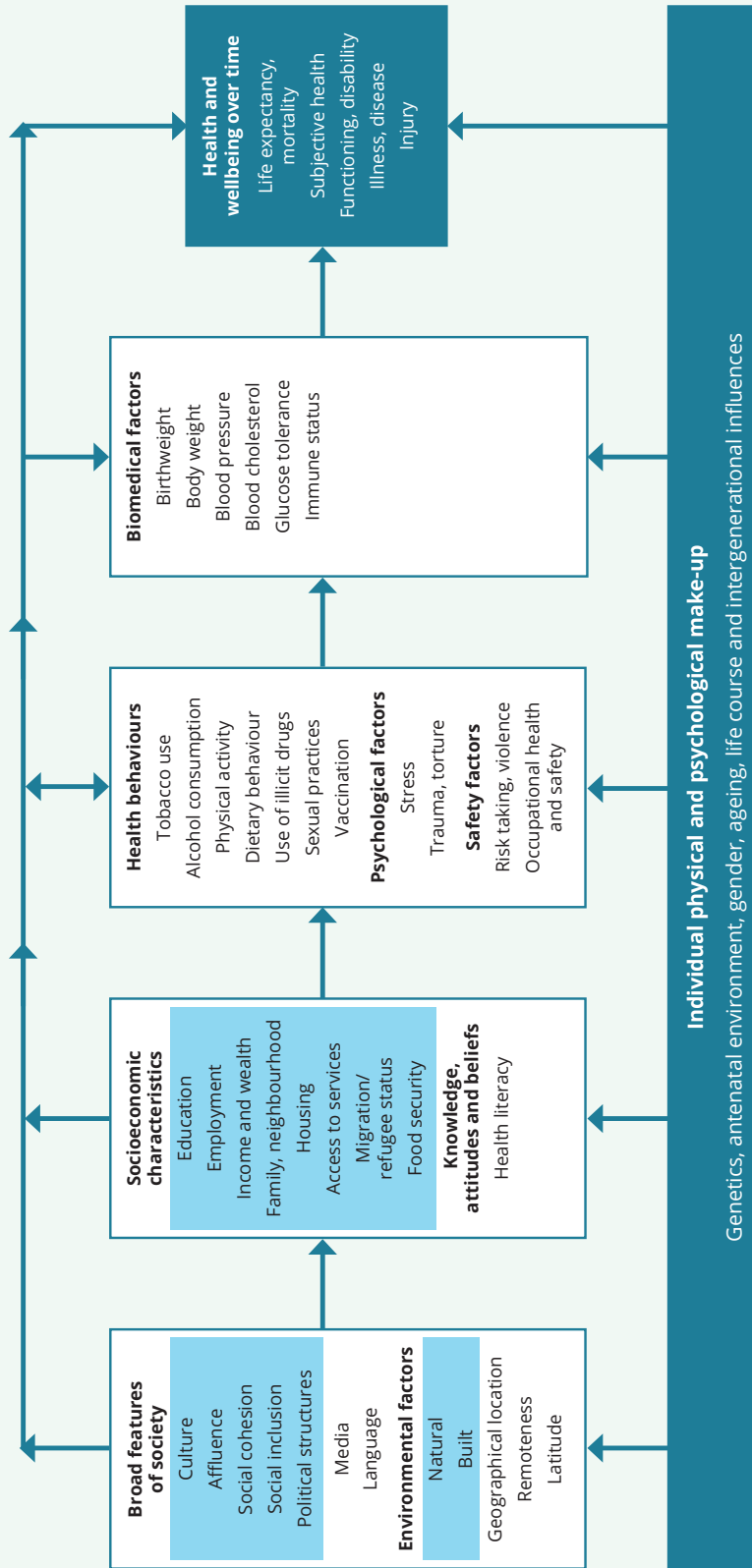
WHO (World Health Organization) 1946. Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19–22 June 1946. New York: WHO.

WHO 2015. Social determinants of health. Geneva: WHO. Viewed 8 January 2018, <[http://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/en/](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/)>.





Figure 1.1.2: Framework for determinants of health



Note: Blue shading highlights selected social determinants of health.