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What is Health Equity?

KEY POINTS

Health equity is the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health.



Preventing Health Disparities

Health disparities are preventable differences that populations experience in the burden of disease, injury, violence, or opportunities. When people have limited access to resources they need to be healthy, they are more likely to experience health issues.

Factors Affecting Health Equity

Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health (SDOH) are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age. Long-standing inequities in the five areas below influence health outcomes and quality of life. Understanding these inequities can help us improve health outcomes and promote health equity.

Social and Community Context

Social context includes the human interactions where one lives, works, learns, plays, and worships.³ Special programs help protect the health and well-being of people who experience disadvantage. Social and community context also includes discrimination (the unfair treatment of people or groups based on their race, gender, age, or sexual orientation). Discrimination—including racism—can be found in many societal systems, including housing, education, criminal justice, and finance.⁴

Healthcare Access and Use

Some groups that have been marginalized face multiple barriers to accessing health care. Structural barriers include socioeconomic status, lack of insurance,⁵ transportation, childcare, or ability to take time off work to visit a doctor. Barriers to patient-provider interactions and health care quality also include cultural differences and language barriers.⁶ Historical events, like the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis and sterilization of American Indian women^{7,8,9,10} without permission, might explain lack of trust in healthcare systems.

Neighborhood and Physical Environment

Access to public transportation, supermarkets, and health care contribute to segregation of American cities. Discriminatory practices limit housing options to neighborhoods with inadequate funding for school districts, higher crime rates, poorly resourced infrastructure, and limited access to nutritious, affordable foods.^{11,12} These conditions can make illnesses, diseases, and injuries more common and severe among discriminated groups.¹³

Workplace Conditions

Occupational health inequities are avoidable differences in work settings. Physical and mental health outcomes are linked to social, economic, and environmental disadvantages. Other workforce factors include temporary work arrangements, socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race), and organizational factors (e.g., lack of safety measures, limited or no health insurance).

Education

Inequities in access to high-quality education commonly affect people who have been historically marginalized.^{13,14} Lower-quality education leads to lower literacy and numeracy levels, lower high school completion rates, and barriers to college entrance. Educational barriers limit future

job options and lead to lower paying or less stable jobs.

Income and Wealth Gaps

In addition to lower-quality education,¹⁵ other barriers to good jobs include geographic location, language differences, discrimination, and access to transportation. [Redlining](#) (denying mortgages to people of color) also limits home ownership opportunity and ability to build wealth. Financial challenges make it difficult to manage expenses and access affordable quality housing, education, nutritious food, and reliable childcare.

SOURCES

CONTENT SOURCE:

[Health Equity](#)

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