

Definitions of Health Equity

David R. Williams, PhD, MPH; Professor of Public Health at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health:

Health equity, health disparity and health inequities are terms that are all used. Health equity is used to describe differences in health that are unfair and unjust.

Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI):

Health equity is realized when each individual has a fair opportunity to achieve their full health potential

World Health Organization (WHO):

Equity is the absence of avoidable, unfair, or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically or by other means stratification.

"Health equity" or "equity in health" implies that ideally everyone should have a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential and that no one should be disadvantaged from achieving this potential.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation:

Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthier.

This requires removing obstacles to health, such as poverty, discrimination and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education, and housing, safe environments and health care.

For the purposes of measurement, health equity means reducing and ultimately eliminating disparities in health and its determinants that adversely affect excluded or marginalized groups.

Paula Dressel, Race Matters Institute:

The route to achieving health equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone equally. It will be achieved by treating everyone justly according to their circumstances.

National Academy of Sciences:

Research shows that poverty, unemployment, low educational attainment, inadequate housing, lack of public transportation, exposure to violence, and neighborhood deterioration (social or physical) shape health and contribute to health inequities.

Boston Public Health Commission:

Health equity is the opportunity for everyone to attain his or her full health potential. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, racism and other forms of discrimination, and resulting consequences, including lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.

American Public Health Association:

By health equity, we mean everyone has the opportunity to attain their highest level of health.

Health Equity Definitions

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Inequities are created when barriers prevent individuals and communities from accessing these conditions and reaching their full potential. Inequities differ from health disparities, which are differences in health status between people related to social or demographic factors such as race, gender, income or geographic region. Health disparities are one way we can measure our progress toward achieving health equity.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

Health equity is achieved when every person has the opportunity to “attain his or her full health potential” and no one is “disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of social position or other socially determined circumstances.” Health inequities are reflected in differences in length of life; quality of life; rates of disease, disability, and death; severity of disease; and access to treatment.

Healthy People 2020:

The attainment of the highest level of health for all people. Achieving health equity requires valuing everyone equally with focused and ongoing societal efforts to address avoidable inequalities, historical and contemporary injustices, and the elimination of health and health care disparities.