

access advocacy
african american
asian american bone
density cancer children
cardiovascular
cholesterol chronic
disease churches
collaboration community
cultural competence
DIABETES diet disability
disparities
diversity education
environment evaluation
ethnicity exposure faith
community financial
need goals grassroots
health insurance
healthcare providers
heart disease higher
rates healthy hispanic
american hypertension
HIV/AIDS insurance
infant mortality
initiative intervention
language barriers LEAD
life expectancy lifestyle
low birthweight
literacy malnutrition
medicare/medicaid men
mental health native
american nutrition
obesity partnership
overweight pollution
prenatal prescription
drugs prevention quality
of care race risk factors
RURAL schools self-
esteem socioeconomics
solutions stereotypes
surveillance technology
teenagers tobacco
tracking transportation
treatment TRUST urban
underutilization
unequal care under-
representation
violence vaccinations
water quality welfare policy
women wellness white
workplace diversity

Health Disparities: A General Overview

What are health disparities?

- Health disparities are differences that occur by gender, race and ethnicity, education level, income level, disability, geographic location and/or sexual orientation.
- Some health disparities are unavoidable, such as health problems that are related to a person's genetic structure.
- However, other health disparities are potentially avoidable, especially when they are related to factors such as living in low-income neighborhoods or having unequal access to medical care and information.

Some examples of health disparities include:

- **Lack of physicians in rural areas.** Residents of rural areas have less contact and fewer visits with physicians.² Although 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas, only 9 percent of the nation's physicians practice in rural areas.¹
- **Unequal treatment for minorities.** Research has shown that even when racial/ethnic minorities are insured at levels comparable to whites, they tend to receive a lower quality of health care for the same health conditions.³
- **Lack of diversity among health care providers.** Lack of diversity among health care providers can be a barrier to communication. Minorities make up 28 percent of the U.S. population but only 3 percent of medical school faculty, 16 percent of public health school faculty and 17 percent of all city and county health officers.⁴
- **Low health literacy.** People with poor health literacy may have problems communicating

with their physician, reading instructions and labels on medicines, completing medical and insurance forms and understanding many other aspects of health care. Over half of the people living in the United States are affected by health literacy.⁵

- **Lack of insurance.** Uninsured women receive fewer prenatal services and needed care than women with insurance.⁶
- **Exposures to environmental risks.** People in low-income communities often have less healthy surroundings than people in other communities. Low-income communities are often located in or near polluting industrial areas and have cheap older housing where lead paint and pests are a threat.⁷
- **Poverty and cancer.** The American Cancer Society estimates that the cancer survival rate of poor individuals is 10 to 15 percent lower than those of other Americans. Low income women are less likely to have mammography and Pap test screening.²

1. "National Healthcare Disparities Report," US Dept Health and Human Services, December 2003, Prepublication Copy.
2. "Rural Poor and the Medically Underserved & Cancer," Intercultural Cancer Council, <http://iccnetwork.org/cancerfacts/ICC-CFS6.pdf>
3. "Closing the Gap 2003: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care," Alliance for Health Reform, October 2003, www.allhealth.org.
4. <http://www.cfah.org/factsoflife/vol8no3.cfm>
5. <http://www.chcs.org/resource/pdf/hl1.pdf>
6. March of Dimes 2003 Data Book for Policy Makers, "Maternal, Infant, and Child Health in the United States."
7. <http://www.ejhu.org/disparities.html>

