

## Episode 1 – What is Public Health

Hi, my name is Mighty Fine. I'm an expert with the American Public Health Association, and today we're going to talk about public health.

Let's say someone is diagnosed with heart disease. Their doctor prescribes some changes to their diet and exercise, maybe even medication, and over time they get healthier.

Our hypothetical heart patient is doing great now. But they could've been 1 of the 655,000 Americans who die of heart disease every year, according to a 2020 report from the American Heart Association.

Which is a lot of people our health care system needs to care for — and that's just one disease! So instead of treating people individually after they get sick, ideally we'd just keep everyone healthy in the first place.

That's where public health comes in.

Public health can be tricky to define, partly because so many factors influence health. In ancient cities, public health interventions focused on sanitation, but also city planning. Over time, public health started targeting specific groups of people, like factory workers.

In industrial-era Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, years of protesting led to better working conditions and fewer workplace deaths. Those were public health efforts too!

These days, public health efforts often focus on addressing the systemic inequities that impact health.

Which are the differences in things like where we're born, where we work, and where we live that determine our access to the resources we need to be our healthiest selves, like safe drinking water and reliable health care.

Research based on U.S. census data from 2010 through 2015 shows that people living without these resources can die up to 20 years earlier than people living just a short distance away. Studies like this are an example of public health's population-based approach, which focuses on societies as a whole rather than individuals.

A population-based approach can be used to inform educators, policymakers and community leaders, all of whom play different roles in improving the health of the community. And like that census study showed, health issues aren't caused by any one thing, so they can't be tackled by any one solution.

Take automobile safety. From 1979 to 2011, motor vehicle crashes in the U.S. decreased by more than 41%. Which took a variety of strategies — like increased

education, stricter laws around seat belts and speeding, and improved design and use of child car seats.

It wasn't a single strategy or solution, but multiple players working together to address the same issue from different angles. Which is important, because our societies don't treat people equally and different people have different needs.

And the best interventions don't just focus on the present. Public health experts call this an upstream focus. Instead of just focusing on the issue and the problems it causes downstream, we look back upstream at the causes of potential health issues and how to prevent them.

Like tobacco use. Despite several downstream measures to get people to stop using tobacco from increased taxes on tobacco products to images of diseased organs on cigarette packaging it remains a leading cause of death in the U.S.

Which is why intervening upstream and preventing tobacco use is so important. Prevention could look like state-mandated school materials on the health impacts of tobacco, or legislation that bars tobacco companies from advertising to children or communities with high rates of tobacco use.

The goal is to prepare future generations to choose and maintain healthy behaviors.

Finally, just like we use a population-based approach and focus on groups of people rather than individuals, effective public health interventions are holistic, which means they treat health as a whole rather than a single aspect.

So public health efforts to address heart disease could look like repairing sidewalks or creating parks in an under-resourced community. This would encourage people to get active, improving their physical and mental health.

So overall, public health includes all of the organized and holistic efforts to improve policy, education, and access — to make the healthiest choice the easiest choice for everyone.

If you want to learn more about public health services, check out the Center for Disease Control's 10 Essential Public Health Services guidelines or the APHA website.

Thanks for watching! This video is a part of a series created by Complexly and the American Public Health Association to shed a little light on the important work that public health does. To learn more, visit [APHA.org](https://www.apha.org).

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