



4.0 Overview

A person's health and wellbeing is influenced by individual, societal and socioeconomic factors. This chapter focuses on these 'determinants of health' or 'risk factors', which combine to affect the health of individuals and communities. They include broad features of society and environment; socioeconomic characteristics; a person's knowledge, attitudes and beliefs; health behaviours; psychological factors; safety factors; and biomedical factors.

Determinants can affect health positively or negatively—they are attributes, characteristics or exposures that increase or decrease the likelihood that a person develops a disease or health disorder. Many risk factors can be changed or controlled to improve health outcomes or to reduce the chance of ill health. In turn, a person's health status influences social and socioeconomic factors; for example, their ability to work, earn an income or participate in their community.

The natural environment is one factor that can affect our physical and mental health. This includes the quality of air and water, the positive and negative health effects of exposure to ultraviolet radiation (adequate exposure can guard against Vitamin D deficiency, while excessive exposure has been linked to various types of skin cancer), and the potential impact of extreme weather events. For example, there have been several 'thunderstorm asthma' events in Australia in recent years, with the event in Victoria in 2016 resulting in 9 deaths.

Many key drivers of health are integral to our everyday living and working conditions—the circumstances in which we grow, live, work and age. One of these social determinants is socioeconomic position, which can be described in terms of educational attainment, income level, and occupational status. In general, every step up the socioeconomic ladder has a corresponding benefit for health. It is estimated that closing the health gap between the most and least disadvantaged Australians would spare around half a million people from chronic illness.

What we know about health and health behaviours can influence how much and how effectively we engage in looking after our own health; however, based on the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics Health Literacy Survey, only 4 in 10 (41%) adults have a level of health literacy that allows them to meet the complex demands of everyday life.

Many chronic conditions share common risk factors that are largely preventable, such as tobacco smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, overweight and obesity, physical inactivity and high blood pressure. Almost one-third of the overall disease burden in Australia could be prevented by reducing exposure to modifiable risk factors. Small personal lifestyle changes can have big health gains for the whole population—if we all did an extra 15 minutes of brisk walking, 5 days a week, Australia's disease burden due to physical inactivity would be cut by about 14%.





Fewer Australians are smoking than ever before—and 62% of the population have never smoked—but the decline in smoking rates has slowed, with no decline seen between 2013 and 2016. Tobacco use continues to be the single risk factor causing the most disease burden in Australia, with the largest impact from tobacco use on cancer, respiratory diseases and cardiovascular diseases.

As well, fewer Australians are drinking at levels that contribute to alcohol-related harm over a lifetime. However, about 26% of people drink more than is recommended on a single occasion, and they do this at least once each month. Younger people show more promising trends when it comes to alcohol—fewer people aged 12–17 are drinking and a greater proportion are abstaining from drinking altogether.

In 2016, Australia recorded the highest number of drug deaths seen in 20 years (1,800 deaths). Hospitalisations associated with illicit drug use have been increasing over the last 5 years, reaching 57,900 in 2015–16 (from 38,200 in 2011–12).

Eating a healthy diet reduces the risk of diet-related conditions and can protect against associated chronic conditions such as type 2 diabetes. However, the eating habits of many Australians do not meet recommended dietary guidelines. For example, about 99% of children, 97% of men and 95% of women do not consume the recommended serves of vegetables, and more than two-thirds (69%) of children and almost half (47%) of adults exceed the recommended intake of free sugars (they should account for less than 10% of energy).

Together with eating a healthy diet, getting enough exercise can reduce the risk of many chronic conditions and other disease risk factors, such as overweight and obesity, and high blood pressure. Despite this, 92% of young people aged 13–17, 52% of adults aged 18–64 and 75% of adults aged 65 and over are not doing the recommended amount of exercise for their age each week.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of Australian adults are overweight or obese. The prevalence has increased over time. Of particular concern, is the growing rate of severe obesity, which almost doubled between 1995 and 2014–15 among adults.

Elevated blood pressure and blood lipids are linked to disease risk. Slightly more than 1 in 3 (6 million) Australian adults have high blood pressure, and almost 2 in 3 (8.4 million) have abnormal blood lipid levels.

