WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

PUBLIC HEALTH

PUBLIC HEALTH is everyday life.

Simple actions we take for granted today such as drinking clean water, breathing clean air, eating safe food, and avoiding infectious disease are benefits that we owe to the efforts of a public health system that is dedicated to making good health available to all of us.

What is Public Health?

"Public health" is the prevention of injury, disease, and premature mortality; the promotion of health in the community; and the response to public and environmental health needs and emergencies and is accomplished through the provision of essential public health services and functions. At the local level, public health is about promoting a healthy community.

Public health affects all of us, all of the time. Public health efforts have increased our life span by nearly 30 years during the past century. Today people live longer because public health recognized and reduced the spread of infectious disease that once cut life short for entire populations. Public health efforts help us modify unhealthy behaviors that place us at risk for disease and premature death.

Who is Public Health?

The public health system involves many players throughout a community. Government health departments have legal responsibility to ensure public health and employ professionals, such as physicians, epidemiologists, social workers, nurses and inspectors.

Public health entities also rely on medical professionals in private practice to perform public health functions and help patients practice prevention. Architects, city planners, housing developers, police and fire departments, and traffic design specialists and many others contribute through their everyday work to the safety and health of our communities. Neighborhood groups and nonprofit organizations also are part of the public health partnership.

Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

The Public Health Alliance of Colorado
600 Grant Street, Suite 335
Denver, Colorado 80203
Office: 303.891.4995   Fax: 303.861.4515
www.publichealthalliance.org

THE MAIN FUNCTIONS OF A PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM

While the structure of the public health system varies greatly from state to state, experts have identified the following as core functions of an effective public health system:

Controlling and Preventing Diseases

From infectious diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, and SARS, to chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis, dealing with diseases in the community is a concern of public health. Public health agencies work with other community organizations to explore the source of disease and to determine the appropriate response.

Protecting Against Environmental Hazards

Environmental health hazards can have a significant effect on the health of our population, but they are often undetected. Another goal of public health is to minimize the public's exposure to environmental hazards, including:

- Assessing risk from chemicals
- Providing fluoridation services
- Managing hazardous material
- Establishing radon programs
- Addressing hazardous air pollutants
- Managing solid and toxic waste
- Controlling water quality
- Screening and investigating lead exposure

Preventing Injuries

Public health implements strategies that can prevent many kinds of injuries. Safety and injury programs cover a variety of injuries, from motor vehicle crashes and agricultural accidents to violence and suicide prevention.

Promoting and Encouraging Healthy Behaviors

Public Health educates communities in health and disease prevention areas such as nutrition and physical fitness, smoking cessation, and early detection of breast cancer. Analyzing which disease risks are most common in their communities and then initiate activities to promote and provide education about healthy behaviors.

Responding to Disasters and Assisting Communities in Recovery

Public health agencies are involved in protecting the community from immediate and long-term effects of natural and man-made disasters. Public health works with emergency management organizations to identify, respond to, and mitigate natural disasters and threats of bioterrorism.

Ensuring the Quality and Accessibility of Health Services

Public health evaluates medical capacity of communities, including quality of and accessibility to health services. Ensuring quality involves licensing of health facilities and workers. Ensuring access sometimes involves providing actual health care to people who lack insurance or cannot access private providers. It also occurs through coordinating among agencies to develop programs in health centers, schools, and communities, and establishing referral sources.