

Health equity is achieved when we all have the opportunity to live a long, healthy life – no matter who we are, where we live or how much money we make.

Equity shouldn't be confused with *equality*. Here's an example of the difference:

- > *Equality* is when each person in a group is given a new pair of shoes in size 9, even though not everyone wears that size.
- > *Equity* is when each person in a group is given a new pair of shoes in the size they wear.



It's a subtle difference, but it's an important one when it comes to health. Health equity is about giving everyone a fair and just opportunity for a healthier life by determining which resources most effectively meet each person's unique needs.

The Challenge

The environments in which we are born, work and live influence our health more than anything else. Education, work, housing, transportation, culture and social factors can be as important to a person's ability to live a long and healthy life as his or her heart health or weight.

It's hard to stay healthy if you live in an unsafe neighborhood or pay for nutritious meals if you work a low-paying job. These "social determinants of health," as they are known, are often the reason why health outcomes vary from one ZIP code to the next. This is where we can look for solutions to improve opportunities for health for everyone, especially those who face the biggest challenges.

What You Can Do

You can support health equity and improve patient health and satisfaction by understanding the non-medical factors that may affect your patients' well-being or impact their ability to follow a treatment plan. For example:

- > A patient might be unable to follow recommendations to eat more fruits and vegetables because she has trouble affording fresh produce at the supermarket or there isn't one nearby.
- > A senior's breathing problems may be the result of living in an area with poor air quality or a home with inadequate ventilation.
- > A patient didn't call the specialist for an appointment as recommended because she was instructed to do so in English, a language she doesn't understand.

Being aware of the challenges some patients face at work and at home is invaluable to successful diagnosis and treatment, more satisfied patients and better health outcomes.

Where to Start

Ask “What’s keeping my patients from good health?” Consider expanding screening for vital signs to include non-medical factors that could help or hamper patients’ ability to be healthy or follow through with treatment. Checklists like the one below can be added to a patient health questionnaire to alert you to challenges in your patients’ lives that could impact their health and treatment:

- I need help with transportation to medical appointments, the pharmacy and other services.
- There are times when I don’t have enough food.
- I worry about losing my housing.
- Sometimes I feel lonely or depressed.
- I don’t have a safe and clean place to live.

Find the common language. Offer interpreters for non-English-speaking patients or encourage them to bring a family member or friend who can interpret for them. Have written materials available in their language. Refer them to other resources where they can get additional assistance, such as the translator services provided by SCAN Health Plan® for its members.

Provide services, understanding and patience for patients with disabilities or special needs. Allow extra time when interacting with patients, provide assistance with filling out forms and offer a TTY line for patients with hearing difficulties.

Connect patients with resources in the community. Be aware of the organizations in your community and other resources that offer financial assistance, transportation, meals, counseling and activities that can help clear the path to good health for your patients. For example, online resources, such as www.independenceathome.org and communityconnections.auntbertha.com, provide listings of local resources for housing support, food banks, medical supplies, health education and other assistance in the community.

Respect differences. To achieve health equity, all patients need to feel as if they are being treated with respect and their health concerns are being met, regardless of their race, cultural background, religious beliefs, gender identity, income or education level.

For more on what’s being done to achieve health equity:

California Department of Public Health Office of Health Equity

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OHE/Pages/OfficeHealthEquity.aspx>

California Reducing Disparities Project

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OHE/Pages/CRDP.aspx>" <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OHE/Pages/CRDP.aspx#>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration Office of Health Equity

<https://www.hrsa.gov/about/organization/bureaus/ohe/index.html>

US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health

<https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/>

US Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Healthy People 2020

<https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/default>