

Health Inequities, Environmental Injustice, and Cancer

Health is a state of complete physical, social, and mental well-being and not merely the absence of disease or sickness. Health is created in the community through social, economic, and environmental factors as well as individual behaviors and biology. Health equity is when every person has the opportunity to realize their health potential — the highest level of good health possible for that person.



When groups face differences in health outcomes, the differences are called “health disparities.” They are due to serious or prolonged social, economic, and environmental health inequities, such as structural racism, and a widespread lack of economic and educational opportunities. Because health inequities are based on social norms and values, change is possible. For more information, see [What Are Health Disparities and Health Equity? We Need to be Clear.](#)

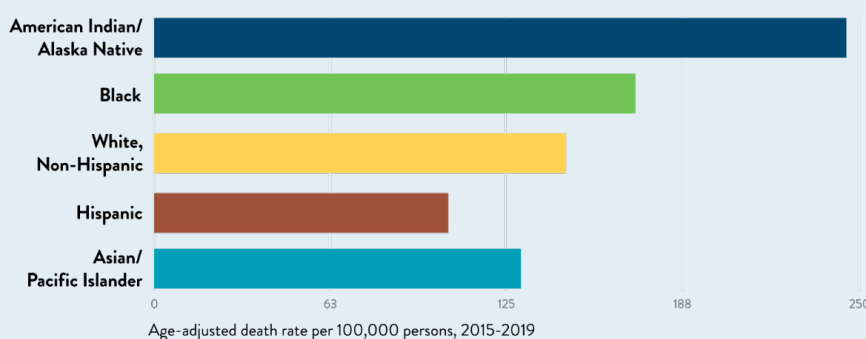
Cancer affects different groups differently, and so it is an example of a health disparity. The burden of cancer falls more heavily on certain communities, especially Indigenous communities, communities of color, and other marginalized groups. People in these communities

are affected by structural racism, historical trauma, and bias which make it harder to access care and resources that support health. Among people and populations that have a history of mistreatment, and whose culture was misunderstood, there can be high levels of distrust of government and health care organizations. The lack of trust makes it even harder for these individuals to access the things people need to be healthy and contributes to continuing health disparities. This means that people in some communities are at greater risk of developing or dying from cancer. In addition, commercial tobacco companies have long targeted people in these communities, as well as LGBTQ+ people, with marketing and advertising that has led to disproportionately higher rates of commercial tobacco use—a leading cause of cancer.

Cancer Deaths by Race/Ethnicity

People who are American Indian and Blacks have the highest incidence and mortality rates for all cancers combined between 2015 and 2019. These results suggest the need for continued, focused, appropriate cancer prevention and control efforts.

Cancer deaths by race/ethnicity, Minnesota, 2015-2019



Environmental injustice creates an added risk of cancer

Most significant risks of developing cancer come from individual lifestyle factors, such as commercial tobacco use. But in some cases, exposures to certain chemicals in the environment may contribute to an individual's risk of developing cancer. Benzene, asbestos, vinyl chloride, radon, trichloroethylene, lead, and arsenic are examples of commonly encountered substances that can increase the risk of cancer. People can be exposed to them in the places where they live, work, worship, and play. When sources of significant pollution (such as industrial manufacturing, improper handling of harmful chemicals and waste disposal, and heavy vehicle traffic) are located close to low-income communities and communities of color, exposure to harmful pollutants increases the risk of exposure to pollutants which might increase the risk of cancer.

Environmental justice: Every person—regardless of income, race, ethnicity, color, or national origin—has the right to healthy air, sustainable lands, clean water, and a better climate. This includes the idea that all people should benefit from equal levels of environmental protection and have opportunities to meaningfully participate in decisions that may affect their environment or health. Many people, especially in low-income communities, communities of color, and Indigenous people, are not equally protected from exposures of environmental pollution, and experience disproportionate impacts from pollution and climate change.

Health disparities and ongoing efforts toward health equity

A health disparity is a type of health difference that is closely linked with social or economic disadvantage. Health disparities adversely affect groups of people who have systematically experienced greater social and/or economic obstacles to health and/or a clean environment based on their racial or ethnic group; religion; socioeconomic status; gender; age; mental health; cognitive, sensory, or physical disability; sexual orientation; geographical location; or other characteristics historically linked to discrimination or exclusion, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

Research shows that the conditions needed for optimal health are safety, shelter, education, food, income, and social justice. It requires excellent schools, opportunities for well-paying jobs, environmental quality, secure housing, good transportation, safe neighborhoods, and much more. These are often referred to as the “social determinants of health.” (What Are Social Determinants of Health? Michigan Public Health—YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iSuZngvCpY) There is a practical limit to the ability of one agency or even state government as a whole in providing all of this. A high quality of life requires a broad community effort and leadership from all corners of society. The Minnesota Department of Health is committed to this effort. We invite and welcome the involvement of all communities in working towards health equity.

MDH and other state agencies are aware that there are many factors that contribute to increased cancer risk, including environmental injustice. The State of Minnesota strives to address health inequities as part of a broad spectrum of public investments in housing, transportation, education, economic opportunity, and criminal justice. MDH works to provide data, information, and initiatives to create conditions that support the health of all people in Minnesota, including protecting people from cancer and potential exposure to harmful substances in the environment.



How can I report concerns about cancer in my community?

To share concerns about cancer in your community, please contact the **Minnesota Cancer Reporting System** at 651-201-5900 or email health.mcrcs@state.mn.us.

To report concerns about cancer in your community due to exposure to an environmental contaminant, please contact the **Minnesota Department of Health Environmental Health Division** at 651-201-4897 or email health.hazard@state.mn.us.

Did You Know?

When seeking solutions to health inequities, we may not always share the same perspectives, and should be open to other viewpoints and approaches.



What can I do if I have concerns about cancer?

Talk to a health care provider. If you have health concerns about cancer it is important to discuss your questions with a health care professional, such as a physician, nurse practitioner, traditional healer, community health worker, or community health representative.

Screening can identify certain cancers early when they are more easily treatable and reduce the risk of death from those cancers. Effective screening programs exist for breast, cervical, colorectal, and lung cancers.

Learn more. Visit our website at www.health.state.mn.us for information about cancer, or www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment for information about cancer and the environment.

Review lifestyle factors. Preventing cancer through healthy daily living is important. For more information, see the “Lowering Your Risk for Cancer” information sheet www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.

Resources

A list of substances known to elevate the risk of cancer can be found on our website, www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.

The American Cancer Society (ACS) (www.cancer.org/about-us/local/minnesota.html) also provides information and resources for Minnesotans with cancer.

To learn more about cancer, cancer resources, and prevention, visit us at our website, www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.



The Minnesota Department of Health is here for you.

Our vision is for health equity in Minnesota, where all communities are thriving and all people have what they need to be healthy.