

This report has provided information on selected health determinants, mental health, non-communicable disease, injury, and communicable disease. It supplies part of the body of evidence needed for effective decision making. Where possible, the information reflects as much history as was possible from available data. Looking at Alberta's current situation within an historical context helps to provide a broad view and perspective on health status. It also allows for a celebration of accomplishment and a look at the challenges to come.

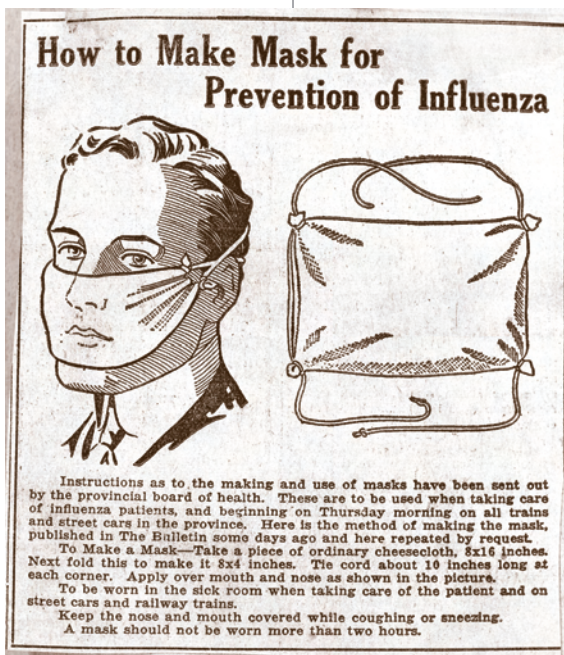
Over the past century, health care in Alberta has evolved from humble beginnings into a complex system that offers a wide range of services for treatment, prevention, protection, and health promotion. When Alberta was established as a province, communicable diseases were a major source of morbidity and mortality. Since that time the incidence of communicable disease has declined substantially. Immunization programs have resulted in significant decreases in disease incidence. Other factors such as improved sanitation and environmental monitoring help to ensure safe food and drinking water. Even with the decline, the risk of communicable disease remains.

Increases in international travel coupled with new emerging pathogens, such as SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), means that constant preparation is needed to mitigate risk. Albertans can expect a more international perspective for the control of communicable diseases. It will be increasingly important to enhance linkages and communication networks within Alberta, across Canada, and internationally to prepare for and control disease outbreaks. Infectious agents know no borders and the rapid acquisition and dissemination of information for response and control is needed and will continue to be a priority into the future.



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Panoka Mental Hospital, therapy lab  
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Over the past century, however, an important shift has occurred. Chronic conditions and injuries have replaced communicable disease as the main driver of ill-health. The shift is partly demographic. In 1930, the life expectancy in Alberta was just over 60 years. Now it is over 80 years for females (82.3 years) and nearly 80 years for males (77.5 years). Population projections indicate that Alberta's population will surpass five million people by the year 2033 with approximately 19 per cent aged 65 and older. The median age of the population will increase from 35 years to over 40 years.



This aging trend highlights the need to develop and implement strategies aimed at reducing the risk of developing chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease. Early detection and intervention also play important roles in reducing the long term burden on the health care system. A focus on addressing the determinants of health will be needed. Chronic health problems develop as the result of a complex, and not fully understood, interaction between individual biology, lifestyle choices, and social and physical environments. Furthermore, many of the determinants of health are outside of the formal scope of the health system. As a result, to be successful in reducing the risk of developing chronic health problems, multi-disciplinary and multi-sector approaches will continue to be needed and expanded.

Physical activity and nutrition are factors that help to reduce the risk of many chronic conditions, such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. Within

Alberta there has been an increase in leisure time physical activity from approximately 40 per cent of the population to about 50 per cent. While encouraging, there is still much room for improvement. The proportion of Albertans eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day is too low. Only 45 per cent of females indicated they eat five or more servings and the proportion is significantly lower among males with less than 30 per cent eating five or more servings.

Another important factor that increases the risk of chronic disease is tobacco use. While the proportion of the population smoking appears to have decreased in recent years, one in four males and one in five females still smoke. Nearly 40 per cent of Albertans aged 20 to 24 years report smoking.

Diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and chronic renal failure have all shown increases in prevalence. The number of Albertans being treated for diabetes has risen significantly over the past 20 years. Diabetes can be considered not only a chronic health condition, but also as a determinant or risk factor for other chronic conditions. People with diabetes are at an increased risk of developing hypertension and other cardiovascular diseases, chronic renal failure, blindness, amputation, and suffer mental health problems.

Increases in the prevalence of hypertension and diabetes appear to be having an impact on the prevalence of chronic renal failure. Chronic renal failure has shown a significant increase in recent years. This increase will place challenges on the health system as there will be an increased need for services such as dialysis.

Presently cardiovascular disease impacts 15 per cent of males and 12 per cent of females. These percentages increase with age. Over half of all Albertans over the age of 65 will access the health system in any given year for a cardiovascular problem. While prevalence appears to be rising, mortality has shown a significant decline over the past four decades being cut in half.

Mental health problems have been increasing over the past two decades. Currently one in five females and one in 10 males seek care within a year related to mental health. Anxiety and depression appear to be among the main drivers of this upward trend. Additional research will be needed to best determine reasons for the increase and to develop strategies for addressing these problems. Currently mental health problems are among the most prevalent of all health conditions being managed by the health system.



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Injuries also represent an area that impacts a significant percentage of Albertans. Since 1997, there has been a decline in the proportion of Albertans who have sought care for an injury. Despite the decreasing trend, one in four Albertans still seek care in a year due to an injury. Injuries represent health events that are primarily preventable. There is significant room for improvement in the overall reduction of the burden of injuries on the individual, community, and health system. Successful decreases in injury would help to increase the capacity of the health system to deal with other issues.

While there have been many accomplishments over the past century, there are still many challenges for the health system to address. Smoking rates are still too high and proper nutrition and physical activity are too low. Injuries still represent a significant burden despite the strong evidence that they are highly preventable. Chronic diseases and mental health problems are increasing and will continue to do so in the context of an aging population. The control of communicable disease will continue to be a challenge in a more global economy with more international travel. The importance of immunization and other public health activities will be critical in the control of communicable disease, while a focus on the determinants of health will be important for the control of non-communicable disease.

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