



Backgrounder: How Healthy Are Canadians?

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians provides the information we need to answer the question: “How healthy are Canadians?”

By almost any measure, Canada is a highly desirable, healthy place to live. An overall high standard of health, however, is not shared equitably by all sectors of society.

Many Canadians enjoy a high level of health which continues to improve.

- ◆ Sixty-three percent of adult Canadians say that their health is excellent or very good, and only 9% rate their health as fair or poor.
- ◆ Canada ranks in the top three developed countries in the world in measures of life expectancy, self-rated health and mortality rates. Life expectancy in Canada has reached a new high: 75.7 years for men and 81.4 years for women.
- ◆ Most recent immigrants to Canada are in good health and the majority of our older citizens enjoy independence and good health.
- ◆ In 1996, Canada’s infant mortality rate dropped below the level of six infant deaths per 1,000 live births for the first time.
- ◆ The United Nations (UN) ranks Canada first in the world on its Human Development Index. That standing drops to 10th place, however, when the UN Human Poverty Index for industrialized countries is applied. The UN report suggests that this drop is because “Canada has significant problems of poverty and their progress in human development has not been evenly distributed.”

Gender and age have varying effects on health status.

- ◆ Men are more likely than women to die prematurely, largely as a result of heart disease, fatal unintentional injuries, cancer and suicide. Men are almost twice as likely as women to die before age 70.
- ◆ Although women live longer than men, they are more likely to suffer depression, stress overload (often due to efforts to balance work and family life), chronic conditions such as arthritis and osteoporosis, and injuries and death resulting from family violence.
- ◆ Although overall cancer death rates have declined in men, they have remained persistently stubborn among women, mainly due to increases in lung cancer mortality. Teenage girls are now more likely than adolescent boys to smoke. If increased rates of smoking among young women are not reversed, lung cancer rates among women will continue to climb.

- ◆ Rates of physical activity drop quickly as age increases, and males are more active than females in every age group.
- ◆ Older Canadians are far more likely than younger Canadians to have physical illnesses; however, youth aged 12 to 19 report the lowest levels of psychological well-being.
- ◆ Despite a 50% reduction in mortality over a generation, unintentional injuries are still the leading cause of death among children and youth, as well as a tragic and costly cause of disability. Boys and young men experience more unintentional injuries and more severe injuries than girls and young women.
- ◆ Suicide rates among young men (especially in Aboriginal communities) are high in Canada, compared to other countries.
- ◆ Young children, especially those who live in poor neighbourhoods, are most likely to suffer illnesses related to environmental toxins and second-hand smoke. Asthma has dramatically increased among young children in the last decade.

Canadians with low incomes are more likely than Canadians with high incomes to suffer illnesses and to die early.

- ◆ Only 47% of Canadians in the lowest income level rate their health as excellent or very good, compared to 73% of Canadians in the highest income group.
- ◆ Canadians who live in the poorest neighbourhoods are more likely than residents of the richest neighbourhoods to die at an early age.
- ◆ Children in low-income families and neighbourhoods are at higher risk than children who grow up in families with higher incomes for infant death and low birthweight. They are more likely to experience developmental delays and injuries. The number of young children who lived in low-income families increased from one in five in 1990 to one in four in 1995. These proportions are higher in Aboriginal and recently arrived immigrant communities, and in families headed by very young parents and women who are single parents.

Canada's Aboriginal people are at higher risk than the Canadian population as a whole for poor health and early death.

- ◆ Despite major improvements since 1979, infant mortality rates among First Nations people in 1994 were still twice as high as among the Canadian population as a whole.
- ◆ Life expectancy is significantly lower among Aboriginal people than the overall Canadian population. High rates of suicide and fatal unintentional injuries among First Nations and Inuit young people partly account for this difference.
- ◆ The prevalence of major chronic diseases — including diabetes, heart problems, cancer, hypertension and arthritis/rheumatism — is significantly higher in Aboriginal communities and appears to be increasing.

Emerging evidence on early child development suggests a pressing need to provide all Canadian children with the supportive environments they need to thrive.

- ◆ When optimal conditions for a child's development are provided between conception and age 6, the brain develops in a way that has positive outcomes for a lifetime.
- ◆ A loving, secure attachment between parents, caregivers and babies in the first 18 months of life helps children develop trust, self-esteem and emotional control.
- ◆ Infants and children who are neglected or abused are at higher risk for behavioural, social and learning problems later in life. In 1996, family members were responsible for one-fifth of physical assaults and one-third of sexual assaults on children.
- ◆ Readiness for school is an important indicator of future success in school. In 1996–97, approximately 15% of preschoolers arrived at school with low cognitive scores; 14% had high scores in behavioural problems. Children from safe, more financially secure neighbourhoods and whose mothers had higher levels of education were most likely to have better scores.

Toward a Healthy Future

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians helps us take stock of where we are and measure our progress by looking at changes over time. This is an essential first step in addressing the challenges to Canadians' health and well-being in the next millennium. It also identifies priorities for action for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers.

For More Information

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians was developed by the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health in collaboration with Health Canada, Statistics Canada, the Canadian Institute for Health Information and the Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto. The full text can be found on the Health Canada Web site: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>. Printed copies of the *Report* are available from Provincial and Territorial Ministries of Health or from:

Publications
Health Canada
Tunney's Pasture (AL 0900C2)
Ottawa, ON K1A 0K9
Telephone: (613) 954-5995
Fax: (613) 941-5366
E-mail: Info@www.hc-sc.gc.ca