



***Building a  
Healthy Future***



Canadian Public  
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# Building a Healthy Future

*In September 1999, the Ministers of Health from Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments released a report called **Toward A Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians**. Much of the information in this article is taken from that report.*

## How Healthy Are We?

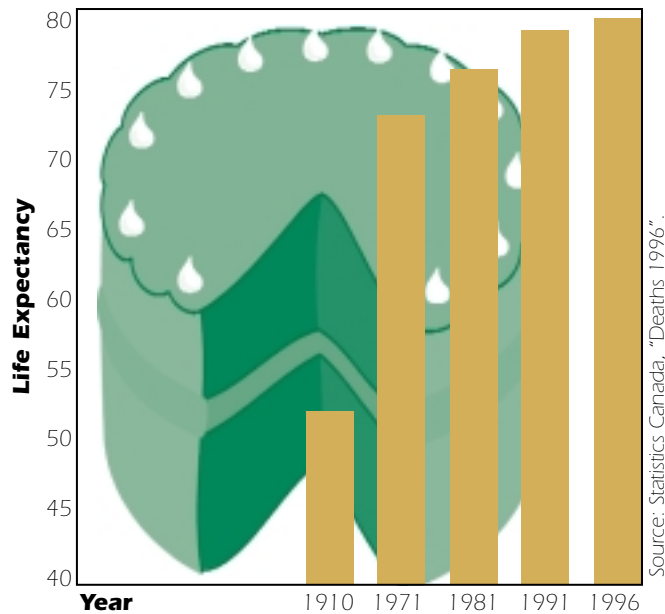
In 1998, the United Nations ranked Canada first in the world when it comes to living a long life, getting an education and earning a good living. Today, Canadians are living longer and can expect to have fewer health problems in old age. Fewer babies die in the first year of life and fewer Canadians die early from heart disease. We can be proud that Canada is such a healthy place to live.

As well as our good record in all these areas, many Canadians are taking active steps to **improve** their health by smoking less and getting more exercise. Because more people are using seat belts, the number of deaths from traffic injuries is down. More than 5 out of 10 adult Canadians now protect themselves from too much sun. The safety of our food and the quality of our drinking water and air are among the best in the world. Despite pressures on the health services system in recent years, Canadians still have access to the medical services they need.

## Did you know?

- **6 out of 10 adult Canadians report that their health is excellent or very good.**
- **Fewer than 1 out of 10 Canadians say their health is fair or poor.**
- **Most immigrants are in good health.**
- **Most older Canadians are independent and in good health.**
- **In 1996, for the first time ever, the number of Canadian infants who died in the first year of life dropped below 6 deaths per 1,000 live births.**
- **Vaccines have reduced the number of childhood illnesses that Canadian children get by 95 percent. Polio has been wiped out in Canada.**
- **Over the past 20 years, childhood deaths from injuries have fallen by 50 percent. Still, children and youth are more likely to die as a result of an injury than any other way.**



**Figure 1: Life expectancy at birth, Canada, men and women, 1910-1996**

### **Not All Canadians Are Part Of This Picture**

In spite of the gains we have made, our high standard of health is not shared by all Canadians. Many Canadians still suffer illness when they don't have to, or die early. For example, most of the injuries and almost all of the health problems caused by smoking tobacco can be prevented.



### **Canada's Aboriginal People Are At High Risk For Poor Health**

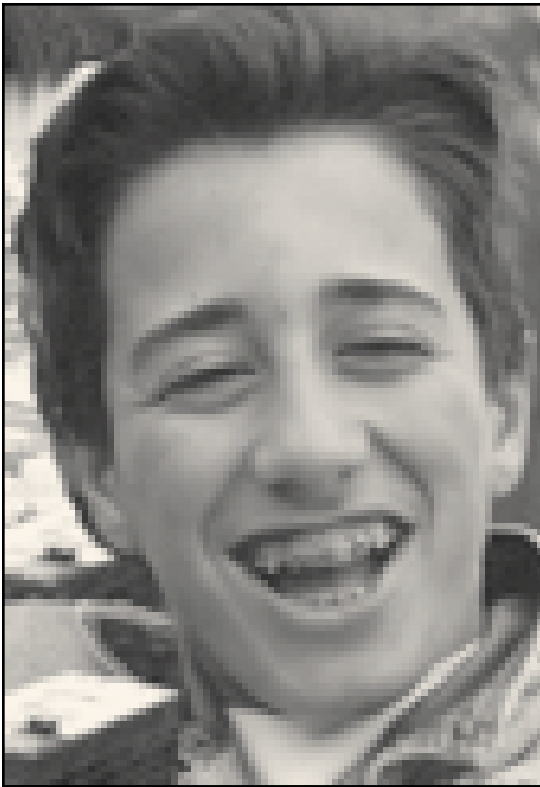
Many Aboriginal communities have made great strides in education. They have also reduced the numbers of infant deaths and the misuse of drugs and alcohol. Even so, Aboriginal people are more likely than the rest of Canadians to die early and to suffer from diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

Poor housing is one of the factors that causes respiratory problems and infectious diseases in Aboriginal children. Children in Aboriginal families also have high death rates from injuries and other causes. Young Aboriginal men (especially those who are Inuit) are far more likely to commit suicide than other Canadian youth.

### Sex and Age Also Affect Your Health

Men are much more likely to die before the age of 70 than women, with heart disease, accidents, cancer and suicide being the most common causes of death. Boys and young men suffer more accidents and serious injuries than girls and young women.

While women live longer than men, they are more likely to suffer from depression, high stress levels and long-term conditions such as arthritis and osteoporosis. They are also more likely to be hurt or die as a result of family violence.



### Number of Canadians Who Died From Lung Cancer (per 100,000 population)

	Men	Women
1969	53	8
1986	79	23
1998	75	35

National Cancer Institute of Canada. Canadian Cancer Statistics, 1998.

Cancer is the leading cause of early death (death before age 70) for both men and women. While death rates from all kinds of cancer have gone down for men, they have stayed the same for women because more women are dying from lung cancer.

In 1998, lung cancer was the leading cause of cancer death among women. Teenage girls are now more likely to smoke than boys their age. If this trend keeps up, more women will get lung cancer and die early.

Older Canadians are far more likely than younger Canadians to have physical illnesses. But young men and women, aged 12 to 19, report the lowest levels of mental health.

**What Makes Us Healthy? What Makes Us Sick?**

Health depends on more than a good health system, regular exercise or eating less fat. Health is closely linked to the environments where we live, learn, work, worship and play.

Imagine that two people are talking to each other:

“Why is Jason in the hospital?

Because he has an infection in his leg.

But why does he have an infection?

Because he has a bad cut on his leg.

But why does he have a bad cut on his leg?

Because he was playing in the junk yard next to his apartment building and he fell on a sharp piece of steel.

But why was he playing in the junk yard?

Because his neighbourhood is run down. A lot of kids play in the junk yard, with no one to keep an eye on them.

But why does he live in that neighbourhood?

Because his parents can't afford to live in a nicer place.

But why can't his parents afford a nicer place?

Because his Dad has no job and his Mom is sick.

But why is his Dad out of work?

Because he doesn't have much education and he can't find a job.

But why ...?”

As this story suggests, if we want to get to the root cause of Jason's illness, we have to look at many factors. These factors are called **determinants** of health and they don't apply just to Jason. If we want to get to the root cause of Canadians' health, illness and early death, we need to look at the many factors that affect each person, each family and the whole nation.

In Canada today, many people believe that solving major health problems means we must take into account the **determinants** of health, as well as having high-quality health care that will help Jason heal.

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## The Determinants of Health

As well as helping us get better when we are sick, our health care system teaches us how to prevent disease and enjoy better health. But other factors (or **determinants**) play a key role in keeping people healthy. Some of these determinants are:

### 1. A Healthy Start

Because low birthweight babies are more likely to die early or have health problems later on, we know that a healthy childhood begins before birth. Good education, healthy food during pregnancy, and support to pregnant women can help prevent low birthweight and other problems.

Between the time a woman gets pregnant and the time her child turns 6, the child's brain develops more than at any other time in life. Getting the right kind of stimulation and love from parents and other adults early in life can improve the way people learn, behave and feel about themselves both as children and adults.



### Did you know?

- In 1990, 1 out of every 5 Canadian children under the age of 6 lived in a low-income family.
- By 1995, 1 out of every 4 children under age 6 was living in a low-income family.
- In 1995, almost 5 out of 10 single-parent, mother-led families, lived at a low-income level.
- Canada's health, social, tax and unemployment policies help to reduce the income gap between rich and poor.

Canadian families with low incomes and high stress may not be able to give their children all they need to grow up healthy. But research shows that children in higher-income families can also have problems. All children will have a greater chance to grow up in a healthy way if they have a good birth weight, positive parenting, caregivers who really care and a safe, friendly neighbourhood to grow up in.

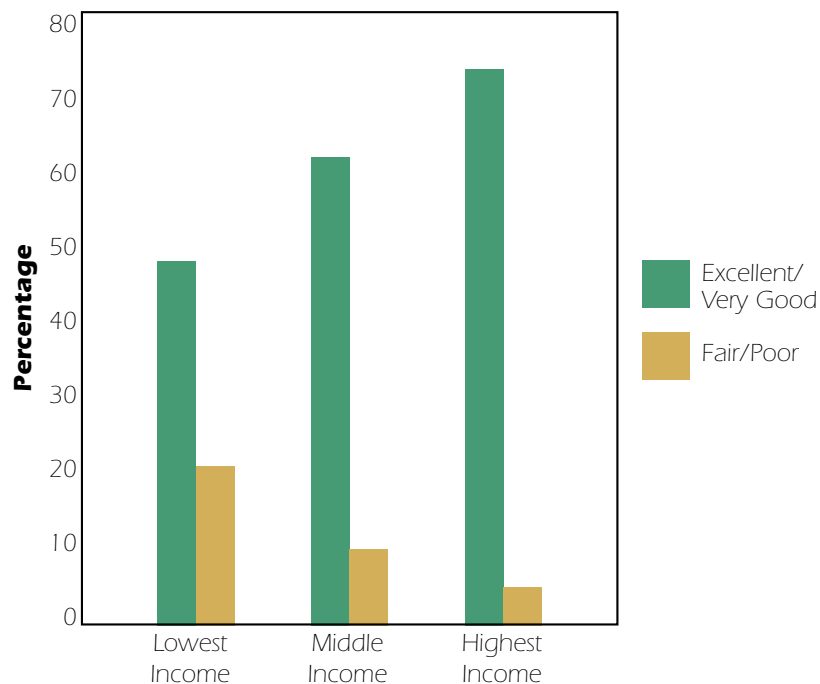
## 2. Income and Health

Low-income Canadians are more likely to die sooner and to suffer more illness than Canadians with higher incomes. This is true whether the person with low income is male or female, young or old, a city dweller or someone who lives in the country. It also applies regardless of what culture they come from or the cause of their death.

- This link between income and health holds true all the way up the income scale. Only about 5 out of 10 Canadians in the lowest income levels say their health is very good or excellent.
- 6 out of 10 middle-income Canadians say their health is very good or excellent.
- 7 out of 10 in the highest income group say so.

In other words, the poorer people are, the less healthy they are likely to be.

**Figure 2: How Canadians with low, middle and high incomes rate their health, Aged 12+, 1996-1997**



Many studies suggest that the way income is distributed in our society may have more of an effect on health than the **total** amount of income earned by people in that society. A big gap between the rich and the poor may cause more social problems and poorer health within the population as a whole.



### 3. Jobs and Working Conditions

People who do not have jobs die sooner and suffer more health problems than people with jobs. Canadians who are most likely to be out of work OR who are not working as much as they want to (because they can only find a part-time job) include:

- ◆ people with low literacy skills and low education levels
- ◆ young people
- ◆ Aboriginal people
- ◆ visible minorities
- ◆ Canadians who have mental and/or physical problems
- ◆ people who live in parts of the country where industries have shut down (such as the fishing industry in Atlantic Canada).



Working conditions can also have a big effect on health. Between 1987 and 1996, Canadians lost less time off work as a result of injuries. But in recent years, job satisfaction has gone down and stress levels have gone up, especially for women. This may be due to the two shifts many women work: one on the job and one at home, where they take on most of the housework, childcare and care of older adults.

### Did you know?

- **Canadians are putting on weight!**  
Between 1985 and 1997, the number of overweight men rose from 22 percent to 34 percent. The number of overweight women rose from 14 percent to 23 percent.
- **As people age, they quickly become less active.** At all ages, boys and men are more active than girls and women.
- **In 1997, 20 percent of people with AIDS used injection drugs.** Before 1990, only 2 percent used them.
- **In several provinces, between 1991 and 1998, young people had higher rates of smoking (especially among girls), under-age drinking, and combined alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use.**
- **In 1995, almost 5 out of 10 young people who were having sex said they had at least 2 sex partners AND did not use condoms at all, or only some of the time.**

#### 4. Social Support

Feeling close to family and friends and being part of a community makes people feel good. Having social support also helps us in times of stress.

For the most part, Canadians are a caring people who report high levels of social support, who like to volunteer, care for others, get involved in their communities and give to charity.

But family violence, which mostly affects Canada's women and children, continues to have a devastating effect on both physical and mental health.



#### 5. Education and Literacy

Literacy is more than just reading and writing. In our information society, it involves the ability to read, to fill out standard forms (like a job application) and to do basic arithmetic.

Compared to people with low levels of literacy and education, people with high levels of literacy and education are more likely to live longer, have a job, earn more money and live in a safe neighbourhood. They are also more likely to be able to help their children succeed at school.

When it comes to healthy lifestyle choices, people with high levels of literacy and education tend to smoke less, exercise more and eat healthier food.

In a 1995 study of adult literacy in Canada, about 17 percent of those surveyed scored in the lowest level of literacy. Another 26 percent fell into the second level which means they can read, but not well. Only 2 out of 10 Canadians function at the highest levels of literacy.

In 1996, more young Canadians (especially women) gained university degrees than ever before. On the other hand, about 22 percent of young men and 14 percent of young women leave school early. These young people are more likely to have low incomes, to be young parents and to have trouble finding a job.

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## 6. The Physical Environment

Contaminants in the air, water, food or soil can cause health problems such as cancer, birth defects and lung disease.

The place where we live and the way our transportation system and cities are designed can have a big impact on our bodies, our minds and how we feel about the world. People feel less lonely when they live in communities where they can visit neighbours and where it's easy to get to schools and shops.

In a 1996 study, almost 2 out of 3 Canadians said that their health was affected by pollution. More than 5 out of 10 people said they were very concerned about the air around them.

Children are most sensitive to contamination. In 1997, four times as many children under age 15 had asthma, than 20 years before.

The physical world affects how we live each day. To be active outdoors, Canadians need green spaces and clean water. Healthy eating depends on a supply of safe food and being healthy on the job depends on having a safe workplace.

## 7. Maintaining Health, Day To Day

We all know that healthy eating and being active promote good health. Most of us also know that smoking, drinking too much, not being active and having unsafe sex can cause illness or early death.

At the same time, we need to see that what we do to **maintain** our health on a day-to-day basis is connected to whether our schools, towns, workplaces and governments help to make “the healthy choices the easy choices.”

An unsafe neighbourhood or a school where bullies rule can lead to more violence, misuse of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs and feelings of anger and depression.



## 8. Health Services

Canadians have many reasons to be proud of our health system. Despite pressures on the health services system in recent years, Canadians still have access to the medical services they need.

Even so, many low- and middle-income Canadians have very little or no access to health services that are **not** covered by Canada-wide, provincial or territorial insurance plans. These services include eye care, dental care, mental health counselling and prescription drugs.



At the same time, Canadians are getting more and more concerned about the quality of care. Because people spend less time in hospital, the need for homecare has risen. Is there enough homecare and is it giving us what we need? What about the increased demands placed on families, especially women, who provide most of the care at home?

Many programs and policies that promote health and prevent disease and injuries have been successful. For example, immunization has greatly reduced illnesses in children and seat belt laws have greatly reduced the number of deaths from traffic injuries. This kind of progress can only be maintained if the programs that support them continue to be strong.



## Health Is Everyone's Business

Good health is sustained in our homes, in our schools, where we work and where we live. Each of us has a part to play.

Governments and health services carry out certain roles when it comes to preventing disease, promoting health, helping older people remain independent, healing the sick and caring for the dying.

Each person has a role to play, too, such as when we care for a loved one who is sick. Although many Canadians try to maintain good health by not smoking, by being active and by learning to handle stress, we also need to convince governments to think about health when they make policies or pass laws in housing, education, social services and other areas. We need to urge business and labour to improve working conditions, to protect the environment and to provide jobs for those who are out of work.

## A Call to Action

*Toward A Healthy Future* suggests five key areas where Canadians can get involved, and take action:

### 1. Invest in Early Childhood

When we invest in children, we invest in the future of our country.

*What Can We Do?*

- ◆ Support pregnant women.
  - ◆ Give your children a stable home and positive feedback. Provide fair guidelines on how they should act and give them lots of love.
  - ◆ Breastfeed your baby.
  - ◆ Read and sing to young children.
  - ◆ Give toddlers the chance to be with other children in places that will help them learn.
  - ◆ Volunteer at a play group or be part of a program for parents and young children.
  - ◆ Work with your neighbours and local police to make sure your community is safe.
  - ◆ Urge your government, the place where you work, your community and the media to support healthy pregnancy, preschool learning, good parenting, high-quality child care and low-cost recreation.
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## 2. Improve the Health of Canada's Aboriginal People

While Aboriginal leaders help their people take control of and improve their health, meeting these goals depends on support from all Canadians.

Canadians who are not Aboriginal can offer to work with Aboriginal leaders and communities to improve their health and well-being.



## 3. Improve the Health of Canada's Young People

Action to improve the health of youth must involve young people themselves. Parents, teachers, other adults, schools, communities and governments need to work together to help young people be the best they can be.

*What Can We Do?*

- ◆ Give young people the information they need to prepare them for healthy relationships, sex, marriage and being a parent.
- ◆ Urge business and government to provide jobs and job training to young people.
- ◆ Volunteer to be a youth group leader or act as a caring teacher and friend (a **mentor**) to a young person.
- ◆ Give young people a chance to be active in their community and have a voice in decisions that affect them.
- ◆ Be a role model for healthy choices.
- ◆ Urge schools and communities to provide smoke-free, safe and healthy places where teens can meet and be active.



#### 4. Renew Our Health Services

Although Canadians have every right to be proud of our formal health system, changes are needed.

We need to be aware, too, that family and friends provide most of the informal care that helps people cope with health problems.

*What Can We Do?*

- ◆ Take good care of ourselves. We can all prevent health problems and injuries by using our seat belts, living smoke-free, learning to deal with stress, etc.
- ◆ Offer to help people who are ill or have a health problem that limits what they can do. Visit with them, take them to the park, help them shop or drive them to a doctor's appointment.
- ◆ Support health care workers, the health sector and governments in their efforts to:
  - ◆ prevent illness and injuries
  - ◆ protect and promote health
  - ◆ improve the way health treatment services report to the public
  - ◆ improve access to dental care, homecare, prescription drugs and mental health services for those who do not have insurance
  - ◆ increase Canadians' understanding of the determinants of health, and support for this way of looking at health
  - ◆ work with other sectors that have a big impact on health, such as housing, social services and education.

#### 5. Help All Canadians Obtain a Solid Education, Literacy Skills and a Good Income

*What Can We Do to Support Literacy and Education?*

- ◆ Stay involved in your child's school.
  - ◆ Support programs that prevent teen pregnancies, so young people can stay in school.
  - ◆ Support lifelong learning. Take courses, surf the Net, read and explore things that interest you, no matter what your age. Get involved in learning activities with older Canadians.
  - ◆ Volunteer to help young people and new Canadians upgrade their arithmetic and language skills.
  - ◆ Urge government and business to support:
    - ◆ learning for preschool children and for older people
    - ◆ literacy programs for people of all ages
    - ◆ English or French as a second language for new Canadians
-

*What Can We Do to Help All Canadians Earn a Good Income?*

- ◆ Protect our health, social, unemployment and tax policies. They help to reduce the income gap between rich and poor.
- ◆ Urge governments, workplaces and communities to:
  - ◆ increase the number of jobs and improve wages
  - ◆ help low-income people and families have access to recreation, and help them get the social and health services they need
  - ◆ increase access to housing that people can afford
  - ◆ prevent homelessness and hunger.



### **The Bottom Line**

While Canadians can be proud of the high levels of health we enjoy, we must also be aware that not all Canadians enjoy the same high levels of health.

To improve the health of all Canadians, we need more than a high-quality health system. We need to work hard to promote health and prevent disease and we need to work together to improve the other determinants of health, such as literacy and education, the way children develop and the conditions we live with every day. Canadians have the knowledge, the will, the skills and the energy. Now is the time to take action to build a healthy future!

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