



PUBLIC HEALTH TERMINOLOGY



Commonly-Used Public Health Terms

1



Commonly-Used Epidemiology Terms

2



Commonly-Used Communicable Disease Terms

3



Commonly-Used Water Quality Terms

5



Commonly-Used Air Quality Terms

6



Commonly-Used Food Inspection Terms

6



Commonly-Used Public Health Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Capacity Building	Empowering clients by helping them discover, strengthen, and utilize their skills, psychological resilience, and local resources to solve their own problems independently in the future.	"Teaching a man to fish" rather than just giving him a fish.
Evidence-Based Practice	Using the best available research to make clinical or policy decisions.	Following a map instead of just guessing which way to go.
FQHC	Federally Qualified Health Center. A community-based clinic that receives federal funding to provide comprehensive care in medically underserved areas regardless of a patient's ability to pay.	Just as food stamps can help families make ends meet, FQHCs provide medical services that private providers aren't able to provide.
Food Desert / Food Swamp	Food Desert: An area with limited access to affordable, nutritious food; Food Swamp: An area over-saturated with high-calorie, low-nutrient fast food and convenience stores.	A neighborhood where the nearest full-service grocery store requires a long bus ride (desert), but there are multiple fast-food outlets and gas station convenience stores within walking distance (swamp).
Hard-to-reach populations	Populations facing significant barriers to accessing healthcare services.	Homeless people, who can be very difficult to locate because they have no fixed address.
Harm Reduction	A set of practical, compassionate strategies aimed at reducing the negative physical and social consequences associated with high-risk behaviors (like substance use) without strictly requiring immediate abstinence.	Wearing a seatbelt or utilizing an airbag. It doesn't stop a car crash from happening, but it drastically reduces the chances of fatal injury or severe trauma when a crisis occurs.
Health Equality	Treating everyone the same and giving them the same resources or opportunities, regardless of their individual needs.	Equality is giving everyone the same size ladder, no matter how tall the tree is.
Health Equity	Ensuring that everyone has a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible by helping people overcome obstacles such as poverty and discrimination that can hold them back.	Equity is giving a taller ladder to the person who is shorter so they can pick apples off a tree like taller people can naturally.
Health in All Policies	Taking health implications into account across all sectors (transportation, agriculture, etc.).	Removing lead from paint, gasoline, and a wide variety of consumer products in the 1970s because of how harmful lead is to the human body.
Kinship Care	The full-time care of children by relatives or close family friends when biological parents are unable to care for them.	A parent asking a grandparent to care for a child when they can't.
PCMH (Patient-Centered Medical Home)	A care delivery model where a patient's treatment is strictly coordinated through their primary care physician to prevent gaps in care.	An orchestra conductor making sure every musician is playing from the exact same sheet of music.

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Population Health	The health outcomes of a group of individuals, including the distribution of health outcomes within the group.	Doctors try to heal patients with heart disease. Population health research tries to figure out why so many people get heart disease in the first place.
Primary Prevention	Interventions that occur before a disease or injury happens to prevent it from ever happening.	Putting a fence at the top of a cliff so people don't fall off, rather than stationing an ambulance at the bottom.
Social Determinants of Health	The conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, and age that affect a wide range of health outcomes.	People who get a good education are more likely to earn a good living. Earning a good living makes it easier to afford good health care. Having good health care makes it easier to stay healthy.
Stakeholders	Individuals or groups with a vested interest in a health project or policy.	All the people and businesses that benefit from a new development, as well as all the people who pay the costs or bear the burden of that new development (in other words, the winners and the losers).
Sustainability	Creating a program, service, or resource that can help people stay healthy today and in the future.	A community garden that is started with public funds but is later supported by private donations.
Trauma-Informed Care	A clinical and organizational framework that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma, shifting the treatment perspective from blame ("What is wrong with you?") to assessment ("What happened to you?").	A mechanic inspecting a car that keeps veering off the road. Instead of blaming the steering wheel for being defective, they check the vehicle's history to see if it was in a major accident that knocked it off its alignment.
Underserved populations	Populations that could receive services if they were offered.	Laid-off workers who lose some or all of their health care coverage when their employer-sponsored health plan goes away.
Wraparound Services	A care coordination process that brings together a multidisciplinary team (therapists, housing case managers, legal aid, educators) to support an individual or family experiencing complex crises.	A pit crew in a car race. Instead of a mechanic servicing the tires, engine, and fuel tank one at a time, a coordinated team swarms the vehicle to handle every single issue at once so the driver can keep moving forward.

Commonly-Used Epidemiology Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Cancer cluster	The Ohio Department of Health (ODH) defines a cancer cluster as a "greater-than-expected number of the same or causally-related cancer cases that occur within a specific group of people, in a defined geographic area, over a set period of time."	Lightning striking an empty field at the same exact spot multiple times when you'd normally expect it to hit randomly across the whole field.

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Confounding Variable	An "extra" variable that you didn't account for, which can trick you into thinking one thing causes another.	Data might tell you that ice cream sales and shark attacks both go up in the summer. That doesn't mean ice cream sales cause shark attacks; the "confounding variable" is the hot summer weather that causes both to rise.
Epidemiological Triad	A model used to explain the spread of disease involving an external agent, a vulnerable host, and an environment that brings them together.	To start a campfire, you need a spark (Agent), dry wood (Host), and oxygen/wind (Environment). If any one is missing, you don't get a fire.
Epidemiology	The study of how often diseases occur in different groups of people and why.	Medical detective work on a population-wide scale.
Incidence rates / prevalence rates	Incidence is the number of new cases; Prevalence is the total number of cases (new and old) in a population.	Think of a bathtub. The incidence rate measures the amount of water flowing from the faucet. The prevalence rate measures the total amount of water in the tub.
Morbidity / comorbidity	Morbidity: The number of people who are injured, suffering from disease, or living with poor health in a population / Comorbidity: the number of people with two or more of these conditions	Morbidity: The number of people who live with diabetes / Comorbidity: the number of people who live with diabetes and liver disease
Mortality	The number of people who die after experiencing poor health, disease, injury, or old age.	The number of people who die from diabetes-related diseases.
Protected health information	Information about health status, provision of care, or payment for health services that can be linked to an individual. Such information can only be accessed or used under strict legal guidelines (i.e., Federal HIPAA laws, Ohio Revised Code 3798).	Specific information you and your doctor share about you, such as your particular demographic data, medical records, or billing information.
Surveillance	Information about threats to the public's health that can be used to guide action by public health personnel, government leaders, and the public.	A "weather radar" for public health that tracks the strength, speed, and spread of disease and other health threats.



Commonly-Used Communicable Disease Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Asymptomatic	Being infected with a virus but showing no outward signs or symptoms of illness.	Testing positive for a disease but still feeling fine.
Case Fatality Rate (CFR)	People who have a specific disease who die from that disease as a percent of all people who have that disease. Similar to mortality rate.	The percentage of people who contracted influenza in a nursing home who die from influenza in a particular outbreak.

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Contact Tracing	Identifying and notifying people who have been exposed to an infected person with the goal of preventing more people from getting infected.	Trying to limit the spread of a disease in a large factory so that the factory doesn't lose so many people to illness that it has to shut down.
Endemic	The constant, "normal" presence of a disease in a specific geographic area.	Millions of people get the "common cold" every year.
Epidemic	A sudden, unexpected spike in cases of a particular disease within a specific population or area.	So far in the 2025-2026 flu season, about 30 million Americans have been infected, and 23,000 have died.
Pandemic	An epidemic that spreads across whole continents or the entire world.	The 1918-1920 flu pandemic spread around the world, infecting one-third of humanity and killing as many as 20 million people.
Fomite	An inanimate object that can carry and spread infection.	A door handle into a store or a handle on a gas pump.
Herd Immunity	When enough people are immune to a disease that it can no longer spread easily.	Smallpox was eradicated because so many people were immunized that the virus had no more vulnerable people to infect and died out.
Incubation Period	The time between when a person is exposed to a germ and when symptoms appear.	The 3-4 day period between being exposed to e-coli and feeling stomach symptoms start.
Pathogenicity	The ability of an infectious agent (germ) to cause disease in a host.	COVID-19 is a pathogenic infection. The "good bacteria" found in human digestive systems are not pathogenic because they don't make people sick.
R0 (pronounced R-naught)	The average number of people one infected person will pass a virus to.	Measles has a high R0 (1 infected person can infect 12-18 other people); seasonal flu has a low R0 (1 infected person can infect 1-2 other people).
Vector-borne	A disease transmitted by another living organism.	The common cold spreads directly by touching or breathing in viruses. Lyme Disease is spread indirectly by being bitten by a tick which was carrying the disease.
Virulence	The severity or harmfulness of the disease; how "strong" the virus is.	The "strength of the punch" the disease throws.
Zoonotic	An infectious disease that "jumps" from animals to humans.	The most common way of getting anthrax is by exposure to infected livestock, though exposure due to bioterrorist attack is still possible.



Commonly-Used Water Quality Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Aquifer	An underground layer of porous rock or sediment that holds and moves groundwater.	Like a soft drink in a glass of crushed ice. Just as a straw can be used to suck out the soft drink from the glass, a pump can be used to suck groundwater out of an aquifer.
BOD (Biochemical Oxygen Demand)	The amount of dissolved oxygen needed by organisms to break down organic material.	The water's "appetite" for oxygen; high BOD means the water is hungry for oxygen.
Dissolved Oxygen (DO)	The amount of gaseous oxygen (O ₂) dissolved in the water.	The amount of breathable air for fish and aquatic life.
Effluent	Sewage or treated wastewater that discharges into rivers, lakes, tributaries, or other waters of the state.	The wastewater discharging from a sewage treatment system (STS).
Eutrophication	When water becomes overly enriched with nutrients, leading to excessive algae growth.	A pond that has so much algae that it uses up all the oxygen in the water, preventing anything else from living or growing.
Fecal Coliform	Common bacteria normally found only in human and animal waste which is an indicator microorganism for fecal contamination.	If fecal coliform is present, it likely appeared because of contamination by sewage. It serves as a warning that more dangerous pathogens like e-coli may be present as well.
Hardness	The concentration of dissolved minerals, specifically calcium and magnesium.	Hard water leaves white spots on your glasses, soft water does not.
Leaching	The natural or deliberate process by which water percolates through the soil, dissolving and washing away water-soluble nutrients, minerals, and contaminants.	Like hot water pulling the flavor out of a tea bag, leaching pulls toxins out of wastewater as a method of treatment
MCL (Maximum Contaminant Level)	The highest level of a contaminant that is allowed in drinking water.	When your blood sugar passes a certain point, a doctor diagnoses you with diabetes.
Secondary Standards	Non-mandatory guidelines for contaminants that affect aesthetics (taste, odor, color).	Water left in a glass overnight may be drinkable, but it doesn't taste as good as fresh water from the tap.
TDS (Total Dissolved Solids)	The combined content of all inorganic and organic substances in water.	When you put some sugar in your coffee, it dissolves. If you put in too much, the extra falls to the bottom.
Turbidity	A measure of how cloudy or hazy water is due to suspended particles.	The "fog" in the water; high turbidity can hide germs from disinfectants.



Commonly-Used Air Quality Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Airshed	A geographic area where, due to topography and weather, the air behaves as a single mass.	A giant "shared bowl" of air that everyone in a valley or city breathes from.
AQI (Air Quality Index)	A color-coded scale (0–500) used to communicate how clean or polluted the air is.	A "traffic light" for your lungs; it tells you how safe it is to go outside
Attainment Area	A geographic area that meets the national health standards for a specific criteria pollutant.	Getting a clean bill of health from your doctor.
Criteria Pollutants	The "Big Six" pollutants the EPA is required to regulate: Ozone, PM, CO, SO ₂ , NO _x , and Lead.	The "Most Wanted" list of common air pollutants.
Ground-Level Ozone	A secondary pollutant created by chemical reactions between oxides of nitrogen (NO _x) and VOCs in sunlight.	Good up high, bad nearby. It protects us from ultraviolet rays in the stratosphere but burns our lungs on the ground.
HAPs (Hazardous Air Pollutants)	188 specific "air toxics" known to cause cancer or other serious health effects, separate from the criteria pollutants.	Dangerous chemicals that have no safe limit, as opposed to criteria pollutants
NO_x and SO_x	Shorthand for Nitrogen Oxides and Sulfur Oxides, major precursors to acid rain and smog.	The building blocks of air pollution.
Primary vs. Secondary Pollutants	Primary: Emitted directly (tailpipe smoke). Secondary: Formed in the air via reactions (smog).	Tailpipe smoke is a primary pollutant, made directly by an engine. Smog is a secondary pollutant, made indirectly when a pollutant chemically bonds to air
Temperature Inversion	A weather event where a layer of warm air traps cooler air (and pollution) near the ground.	A lid that keeps all the steam and smoke trapped inside a pot on a stove.
VOCs (Volatile Organic Compounds)	Chemicals that easily become vapors or gases (like gasoline, paint thinners, or "new car smell").	An unhealthy chemical that evaporates into the air at room temperature.



Commonly-Used Food Inspection Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Air Gap	A literal, physical space of air between a water supply outlet and the flood level rim of a sink or drain, used to prevent backflow.	The ultimate plumbing safety barrier - gravity guarantees that dirty water can't jump upward through empty air into a clean pipe.

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
CCP (Critical Control Point)	A specific step in food preparation where a hazard can be prevented, eliminated, or reduced to a safe level.	Using a thermometer to make sure a ground beef patty hits exactly 155°F to completely destroy E. coli.
CIP (Clean-in-Place)	Cleaning and sanitizing equipment surfaces by circulating liquid chemicals through a piping system without dismantling the machine.	Running a self-cleaning cycle on a commercial soft-serve ice cream machine without taking every single gear apart.
Cleaning vs. Sanitizing	Cleaning removes visible dirt and food particles. Sanitizing uses heat or chemicals to reduce invisible pathogens to safe levels.	Wiping the crumbs off a table (cleaning) vs. using a bleach solution to kill anything that might be living on the table (sanitizing).
Core vs. Priority Item	Priority items directly relate to foodborne illness (e.g., no sanitizer). Core items relate to general maintenance and hygiene (e.g., a cracked floor tile).	The difference between fixing your car's brakes and changing the air filter (do it now vs. do it when you can).
Cross-Connection	A physical plumbing link between a safe drinking water system and a polluted or contaminated water source.	A pipe malfunction that allows mop-sink wastewater to get siphoned backward into the soda fountain lines.
Cross-Contact	The accidental transfer of a food allergen (like peanuts or dairy) to a non-allergen food. Crucial distinction: Cooking destroys bacteria, but it does NOT destroy allergens.	Using the same pair of tongs to grab a peanut butter cookie and then a chocolate chip cookie.
Cross-Contamination	The physical transfer of harmful pathogens (bacteria, viruses) from one food, surface, or utensil to another.	Using the same cutting board to cut raw chicken for a meal and vegetables for a salad.
Exclusion vs. Restriction	Exclusion means a sick employee is banned from entering the facility entirely. Restriction means they can work but cannot handle food, clean dishes, or clean linens.	In sports, exclusion means not dressing for a game; restriction means not being able to play at full speed.
HACCP	Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point. A systematic, preventive management system that identifies and controls biological, chemical, and physical hazards.	A highly detailed "pre-flight checklist" for kitchen staff to prevent hazards before they happen.
TCS Food	Time/Temperature Control for Safety food. High-risk foods (like meat, dairy, cut melons, cooked rice) that require temperature control to limit pathogen growth.	The "high-maintenance" foods that will quickly breed bacteria if left sitting out on a counter.
The Danger Zone	The temperature range between 41°F and 135°F where foodborne bacteria multiply most rapidly.	The "Goldilocks zone" for germs where they grow easiest and quickest.