Assessing our Health

How healthy are we? To help answer this question, we have developed a short "Report Card"—a list of measures to tell us, at a glance, what our overall health looks like.

A tremendous amount of information about health is available, and it is used for different purposes—for assessing health care needs, for setting clinical priorities, for developing preventive strategies, and for monitoring provider performance. Because of this breadth of uses, health information often appears confusing, complicated, and even contradictory to health policy makers and the public. The Washington Legislature sought to remedy this situation by directing the Department of Health to identify the "key health outcomes sought for the population and the capacity needed by the public health system …in improving health outcomes."

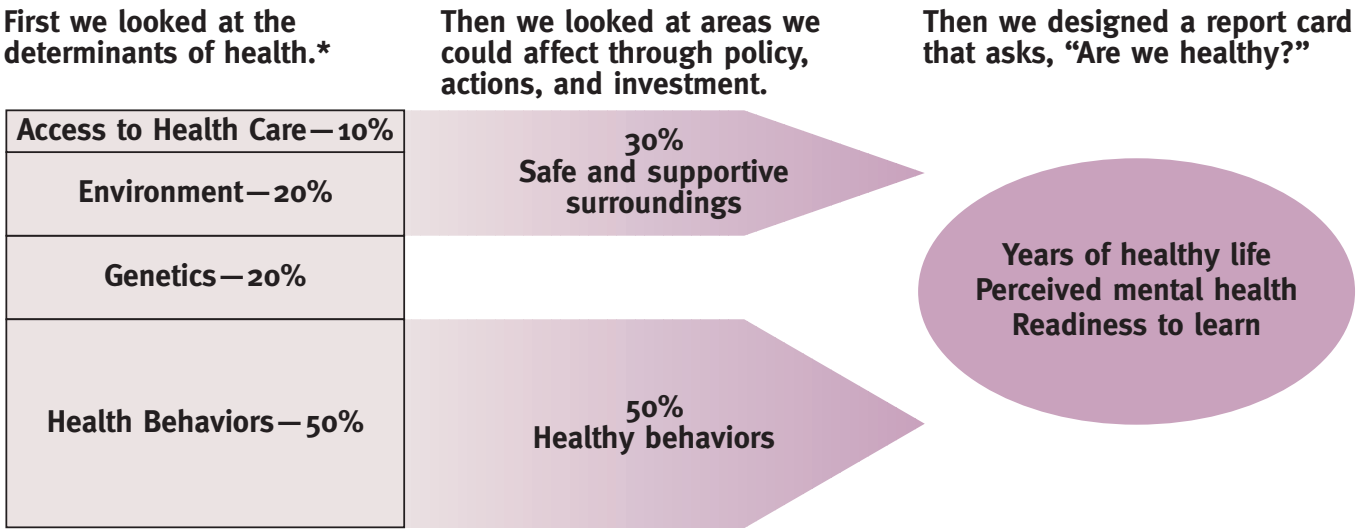
How healthy are we? We have a two-part strategy to answer this question. The first part is to develop a short "Report Card"—a list of measures to tell us, at a glance, what our overall health looks like. Health officials and public health partners have compiled a list for consideration, and it appears on page 15. This concise list of indicators is designed to help people think about health not in terms of diseases but in terms of the underlying causes of disease. These include social, community, and environmental factors as well as personal health behaviors.

The second part is to publish a more in-depth compilation of health indicators that can be used to examine specific health problems and to provide a concise summary of what scientific evidence supports as effective interventions. This strategy will be met with a new edition of *The Health of Washington State,* a periodic update on the health status of all who live in Washington, including interventions to improve health. The next edition will be published—with new data from the 2000 Census—in early 2002. A detailed list of health indicators to be included appears in Appendix 3.

Both the Report Card and *The Health of Washington State* will be used locally and at the state level by public health officials and many other partners to improve health status, draw people's attention to health issues, and ensure the accountability of all systems—health, social service, environmental, and educational—that contribute to people's health and well-being. Within communities, they will be used alongside the local health assessments completed by every health jurisdiction.

The Report Card focuses first and foremost on the physical and mental

How We Developed Washington's Health Report Card



*As reprinted in the Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, March 1997

health of the population. The report card content is based on a model that shows what factors determine our health and translated this into health outcomes, as shown in the above graphic.

Scientific evidence connecting indicators with health status guided creation of the list. Public health officials, academic specialists, and community representatives participating in the process generally chose indicators of health over indicators of disease, underlying causes (nutrition, exercise) over "downstream" indicators (obesity), and indicators appropriate for the entire state population over those for subgroups.

The Report Card's indicators support three overall health outcomes. They are:

- **Years of healthy life**—This indicator, used in the federal Department of Health and Human Services report *Healthy People 2010*, combines life expectancy with quality of life, which is characterized by levels of functioning and absence of pain.
- **Perceived mental health**—This indicator provides a global indication of the sense of mental well-being.
- **Readiness to learn**—This reflects healthy brain development, nutrition, adequate medical care, and age-appropriate social development.

The Report Card identifies indicators that contribute to the three general health outcomes—in the context of our surroundings, our health care system, and the behaviors that affect our health.

"How safe and supportive are our surroundings?" addresses the safety of our air, food, water, the role of various community attributes, and the adequacy of health care. These factors together contribute 30% to health, according to the model.

The Report Card and The Health of Washington State *recognize the full scope of activities that contribute to health and in which our public health system is engaged.*

"How healthy are our behaviors?" examines tobacco use, nutrition, physical activity, and alcohol or drug abuse. These factors contribute 50% to health.

Although the Report Card differentiates surroundings from behaviors, they are closely linked. For example, hand washing is a behavioral component of food safety, and community norms (such as smoke-free work places) affect tobacco use.

Measures for the indicators are drawn from data such as those collected by the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)—a telephone interview that gathers information on health status, health-related behavior, and use of health services—and from notifiable conditions databases and other sources that are also shown in Appendix 3.

The Health of Washington State will, to the extent possible, present indicators that can be interpreted by counties as well as by sub-groups based on gender, age, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic levels. Together, the Report Card and *The Health of Washington State* recognize the full scope of activities that contribute to health—from protecting the safety of food and water to assuring access to health care to preventing tobacco use—in which our public health system is engaged.

Report Card on Washington's Health—"How healthy are we?"

General Health Indicators:

- **Years of healthy life**
- **Perceived mental health**
- **Readiness to learn**

Specific Health Indicators:

"How safe and supportive are our surroundings?"

"How safe are our food, water, and air?

- Illnesses commonly associated with unsafe food and water
- Air quality

"How safe and supportive are our communities?"

- Economic:
  - Percent below poverty threshold
- Social connectedness:
  - Civic involvement, interpersonal trust, high school graduation rates
- Injuries and death:
  - Unintentional—traffic, poisoning drowning, fires, falls
  - Family violence
  - Homicides and suicides

"How supportive is our health care system?"

- Unmet need—adults, children
- Vaccine-preventable diseases

"How healthy are our behaviors?"

"Do we use tobacco products?"

- Percent non-smokers

"Do we get good nutrition?"

- 5 fruits and vegetables a day

"Are we physically active"

- 30 minutes—5 times a week

"Do we abuse alcohol and other drugs?

- Binge drinking—5+ drinks

Next Steps

For Assessing Our Health

1. Circulate the proposed Washington Report Card for Health.
   - Seek comment on the indicators and ideas for improving them.
   - Finalize the report of the committee's work, and publish it separately.
   - Continue work to oversee the report and committee process.
2. Collect and publish data, using the Report Card indicators for which data are available.
3. Set a schedule for regularly reissuing and revisiting the Washington Report Card for Health.
4. Publish the detailed set of indicators, *The Health of Washington State.*
5. Begin development of necessary new data sources, and assess the viability of existing sources.
   - Give particular attention to development and support of BRFSS surveys and the need for more detailed information so that counties can effectively target resources to areas of greatest need.