

Determining Health

Health is not equitable. The United States spent \$4.3 trillion dollars on health in 2021. Despite this massive sum, vast disparities in health experiences persist, due in part to a suite of factors that have been labeled determinants of health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) groups determinants of health into five general categories: genetic, behavioral, environmental and physical, medical care, and social. Within each category, there are numerous individual factors that may influence health. For example, social determinants of health encompass numerous socioeconomic factors, including income, education, and community characteristics. While any single factor can contribute to health outcomes, the effects are compounded when an individual experiences multiple determinants working against their health.

Since most determinants of health are not under the control of the individual, they can be challenging, if not impossible, to overcome. Many factors are deeply rooted in systems that reflect bias, discrimination, and misinformation.

To understand the complexity and interrelated nature of these determinants, consider that women were found to wait 29 percent longer than men in the emergency department when presenting with chest pain. There are many determinants at play here. Women can be genetically predisposed to heart attacks, but they also present symptoms of a heart attack differently than men. Systemic racism has informed medical education, cultivating the false idea that women of color feel less pain. The lasting impacts of these racist teachings have exacerbated the discrimination women face when expressing pain to medical professionals. As a result, women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mental illness (e.g. anxiety) than men presenting with comparable symptoms of a heart attack. Women's symptomatic behavior is often discounted. Additionally, a woman's socioeconomic status impacts how often she can seek medical care and the quality of care she will encounter. Her environment determines where the nearest medical facilities are and how quickly she can reach them.

A successful medical system validates its patients. This does not mean all patients will be treated the same. Instead, it suggests that the healthcare system needs to consider the influence of determinants of health in order to achieve equitable health outcomes. By recognizing the unique experiences and needs of each person, we can work towards equity in our health system.

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“How has U.S. spending on healthcare changed over time?”, Health System Tracker (healthsystemtracker.org); David William and Toni Rucker's “Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in Health Care” in *National Library of Medicine*, 21(4): 75-90, Summer 2000; Michael Marmot's *Social Determinants of Health* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Lindsey Bever's “From heart disease to IUDs: How doctors dismiss women's pain” in *The Washington Post*, Dec. 13, 2023; William Burrows and Dante Scarpeli's “Disease” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2022)