

HEALTH IMPACT OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Every person is an entity

Health is not only physical health; it is mental and social health, too. Health permits people to carry out various functions and to participate in the rich diversity of life to the extent they wish or need. Health can also be seen as a form of coping. It enables people to cope with what is essential but also with what brings them satisfaction.

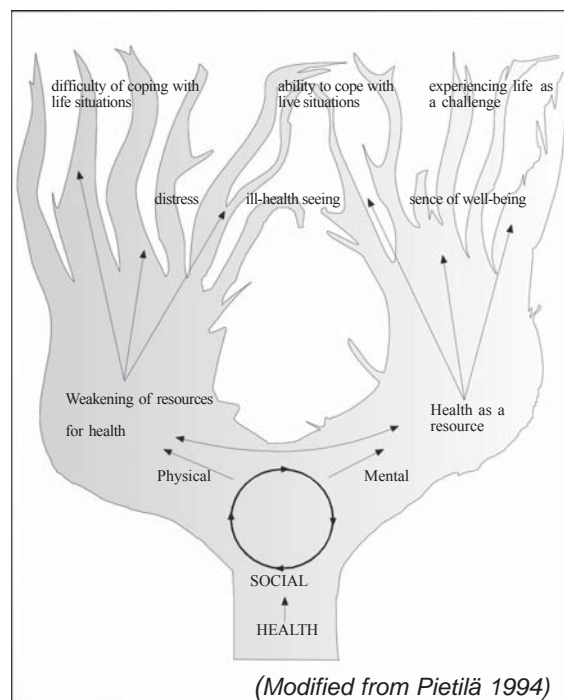
People's physical, mental and social needs constitute a coherent entity. A precondition of health is that these needs are in balance. For people to be healthy, their physical needs must be satisfied. But also important are social relations supporting their well-being and recognition of their mental needs.

Biological factors and processes are of great importance for people's health or ill-health. Increasingly, however, we are coming to accept the concept of the whole person, that is, one in whom certain psychological and social factors make an important contribution to health and ill-health.

A person's health cannot be maintained or produced by the public health services alone. Health is affected by the entire physical environment in which people live.

The environment is a part of health

The living environment provides the framework for people's physical, mental and social health. It should be health-supporting and provide opportunities for recreation and recuperation. Characteristics of such a health-supporting environment can be, for instance, stimulating, aesthetically pleasing and familiar. It can also provide a link to the natural environment or to the history of an area or even a building.



Health is a state in which physical, mental and social needs are in balance.

The living environment can, however, be planned such that daily activities are hindered. A poor environment contributes to social exclusion and the risk of ill-health.

The relations between health and the environment are often indirect. That is why it is not always possible to show directly how an environment can maintain people's health or what kind of an environment can be non-supportive. All people are individuals; so are their relationships to the environment they inhabit.



Legislation and physical health

In Finland many laws and statutes give directions on organising activities that affect the human environment. The objective of the legislation is to maintain and promote the health of the population and individuals. In practice, however, legislation mainly concentrates in protecting people's physical health.

To protect people's health, the Health Protection Act, for example, gives directions on:

- household water, water pumping plants, waterworks, monitoring the quality of household water
- waste and wastewater including sewers and the collection of wastewater; solid waste collection and waste rooms; composting; privies and dead animals
- health demands concerning the home and other living areas; public areas, buildings and facilities; bathing water; privies; microbes and pests
- general food hygiene including premises where food is kept, self monitoring by entrepreneurs, the organising of public events, food poisoning
- cemeteries and burials

The Land Use and Building Acts stipulate that the use and construction of areas should be so arranged as to provide the conditions for a good living environment. The Acts also seek to promote sustainable development. The regulations on construction include provisions on healthy and safe construction. Labour protection is handled by specific authorities.

Problems change with time

In the early 20th century, infectious diseases were the dominant cause of sickness in Finland. After the Second World War, diseases and problems related to the standard of living, such as cancers, heart disease and accidents, began to pose a serious challenge to health protection.

More recently, problems related to life in the human community and to coping with mental stress have gained prominence. For example, depression, eating disorder and difficulties with social relations require people to be considered not only in terms of their physical health but also as socially and mentally well-balanced individuals.

Components of the environment that include very serious health risks but that are largely under control in Finland:

- household water supply
- radiation safety

Components that are not under control:

- air quality in towns
- noise
- accidents
- mental and social health risks caused by the environment

Control of risks and promotion of health for the future:

- efforts to combat climate change
- efforts to combat ozone depletion
- community planning and healthy construction
- promoting participation of citizens
- research and development

(Modified from Tuomisto 1997)

The environment and mental and social health

The increase in the human life span is a sign that the physical environment is healthy and safe. People's physical health is also good; people live active lives longer and in good health.

The interaction between health and the environment has long been recognised by the medical and environmental health professions. A good example of this is the prevention of contagious diseases. Now, however, the interaction between health and the environment needs to be examined from a new perspective: what can be done to ensure that the environment is good both mentally and socially?

The need to create a mentally and socially good environment is a new challenge facing the medical and environmental health professions working in unison with other experts. What kind of environment prevents people from becoming depressed or marginalised? What kind of physical environment can help prevent people from falling ill by providing social support? And what kind of environment offers a place where people can recover from the stress of daily life?

MEASURABLE HEALTH		HEALTH BASED ON EXPERIENCE	
ABSENCE OF DISEASE	No diagnosed disease No known health risks		No threat to well-being that can be shown by indicators
OVERALL WELL-BEING	No sense of ill-health No probable health risks		Experience of physical, mental and social well-being, amenities, lack of disturbance

(Pertilä 1999)

PEOPLE IN THEIR ENVIRONMENT

People spend their day in many different environments, each one of which has either a negative or a positive impact on them. Some people are very sensitive to these environments; others less so. Some people seek relief from stress in these environments, others, however, are not consciously aware that the environment has any significance.

Examples of different kinds environments:

- the home
- living environment
- natural environment
- man-made environment
- environment in which a person was born
- environment in which a person grows up
- work or school environment.

All these environments have an impact on people's internal and external satisfaction and on their social and ecological behaviour. They affect people's overall health. Changes in daily environments affect people either consciously or unconsciously. They, too, have health implications.

A good environment requires people to be viewed as a whole

A good human environment takes account of people's physical, mental and social needs. Noise levels, for instance, influence people's satisfaction with their environment. Noise may remain below the prescribed decibel limit and yet may disturb sleep or outdoor recreation. Amenity, too, has an impact on people's health. A pleasing environment is good to live in and people feel at home there. An unpleasing environment makes people want to move away at the first opportunity.

Relationships between people and the environment they inhabit are the product of a complex web of interactions. It is not possible to state categorically what kind of environment is good or what kind is bad. Everyone has a different experience of what makes an environment good or bad for them: different people feel good in different environments. Likewise the importance of the environment varies from one person to another. The challenge lies in pinpointing the factors in different environments that are good for a person's physical, mental and social well-being and in enhancing those factors.

CATEGORIES OF INFLUENCES ON HEALTH	EXAMPLES OF SPECIFIC INFLUENCES (health determinants)
Biological factors	age, sex, genetic factors
Personal/family	Family structure and functioning, primary/secondary/adult education, occupation, unemployment, income, risk-taking behaviour, diet, smoking, alcohol, substance misuse, exercise, recreation, means of transport (cycle/car ownership)
Social environment	culture, peer group pressures, discrimination, social support, (neighbourliness social networks/ isolation)community/cultural/spiritual participation
Physical environment	water, air, housing conditions, working conditions, noise smell, view, public safety, civic design, shops (location/ range/ quality), communications (road/rail), land use, waste disposal, energy, local environment features
Public services	access to (location/disabled access/costs) and quality of primary/community/secondary health care, children´s day care, social services, housing/leisure facilities/ employment/social security services, public transport, policing, other healthrelevant public services, non statutory agencies and services
Public policy	economic/social/environmental/health trends, local and national priorities, policies, programmes, projects

(Merseyside Health Impact Assessment Training Consortium 1999)

EIA is a tool for assessing health impacts

The Finnish environmental impact assessment (EIA) encompasses factors related to people's health, living conditions and amenity as well as their environment. Local social welfare, public health and environmental health professionals serve as experts in identifying and taking account of the impact that actions have on people.

Their knowledge is important. They know not only the area and its special features but also the people living there. Together with other local stakeholders they can estimate the effects a specified decision will have on people.

