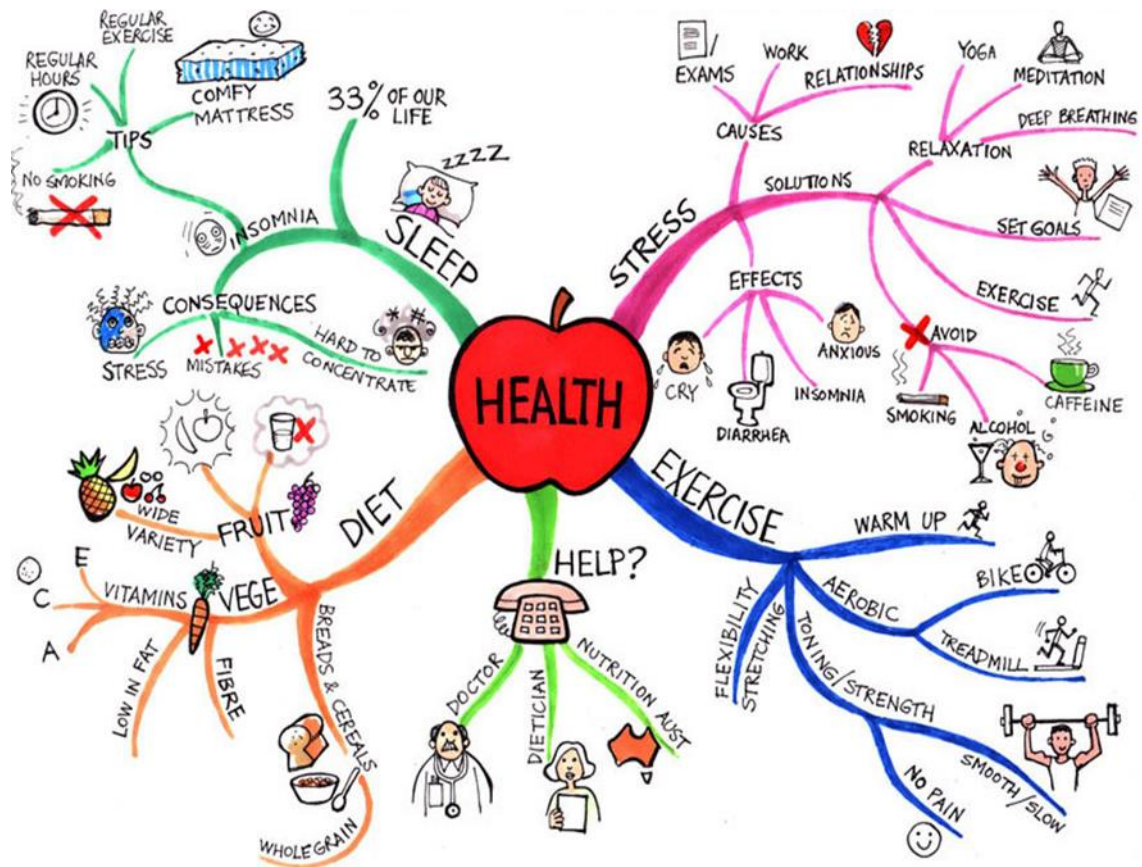


## Unit 1: What is Health?



### WHO definition of Health

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

The correct bibliographic citation for the definition is:

Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.

The definition has not been amended since 1948.

### Re-defining 'Health'

Article: Üstün & Jakob. 2005;83:802

Üstün and Jakob's timely editorial stresses the need for detailing meaningful definitions for health <sup>1</sup>conditions. Most of the definitional issues raised by the authors with regards to 'Drowning' apply to the <sup>2</sup>definition of 'Health'. Although <sup>3</sup>concern with health and disease have been a major pre-occupation of humans since antiquity, the use of the

word 'health' to describe human <sup>4</sup>'well-being' is <sup>5</sup>relatively recent. The word 'health' was derived from the old English word 'hoelth', which meant a <sup>6</sup>state of being sound, and was <sup>7</sup>generally used to infer a <sup>8</sup>soundness of the body.

Prior to the period of the <sup>9</sup>somewhat enigmatic <sup>10</sup>physician known as Hippocrates (c 460-377 BCE, or more appropriately, from around 5 BCE), health was perceived as a divine gift. Hippocrates was credited with the pioneering the move away from divine notions of health, and using observation as a basis for acquiring health knowledge. He was credited with encouraging a focus on environmental <sup>11</sup>sanitation, personal <sup>12</sup>hygiene and, in particular, balanced <sup>13</sup>diets – “let food be thy medicine; and let thy medicine be food”. He theorized that what we currently regard as 'health' might be defined as the extent of a delicate balance of four <sup>14</sup>fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. Ill health, he believed, resulted from an <sup>15</sup>imbalance of these fluids.

Nevertheless, a divine view of health persists to this era. For example, Prophet Mohammed view of health, sickness and death – followed by a high <sup>16</sup>proportion of practicing Muslims - may be inferred from the following verse in the Holy Koran; “The Lord of the worlds; it is He who <sup>17</sup>heals me when I am sick, and He who would cause me to die and live again” (Koran 26: 80).

Health Belief Systems also influence perspectives on the meaning of health. For instance, Becker's Health Belief Model might be used to explain differences in how the concept of health is perceived by <sup>18</sup>individuals and groups - <sup>19</sup>particularly in non-religious contexts - and how such perceptual differences influence response to ill health. But what is 'Health' in the 21st century?

Scores of definitions of 'health' are available on the Internet. The most commonly quoted definition of health is that formalized by the World Health Organization (WHO) over half a century ago; “a complete state of <sup>20</sup>physical, <sup>21</sup>mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or <sup>22</sup>infirmity.”

Several other generally accepted definitions of the noun 'health' exist. Bircher defines health as “a <sup>23</sup>dynamic state of well-being characterized by a physical and mental potential, which <sup>24</sup>satisfies the <sup>25</sup>demands of life commensurate with age, culture, and personal responsibility”, while Saracchi defines health as “a condition of well-being, <sup>26</sup>free of disease or infirmity, and a basic and <sup>27</sup>universal human right”.

Australian Aboriginal people generally define health thus “...Health does not just mean the physical well-being of the individual but refers to the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural well-being of the whole community. This is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.

Critics argue that the WHO definition of health is utopian, inflexible, and unrealistic, and that including the word “complete” in the definition makes it highly <sup>28</sup>unlikely that anyone would be healthy for a reasonable period of time. It also appears that ‘a state of <sup>29</sup>complete physical, mental and social well-being’ corresponds more to happiness than to health.

The words 'health' and 'happiness' designate distinct life experiences, whose <sup>30</sup>relationship is neither fixed nor constant. <sup>31</sup>Failure to <sup>32</sup>distinguish happiness from health implies that any disturbance in happiness, however minimal, may come to be perceived as a health problem.

Bircher's definition takes into account changing health <sup>33</sup>needs, especially in relation to age, culture, and personal responsibility. Health Belief Systems, which are an essentially function of age, culture, and personal responsibility; strongly influence subjective experience of health and ill-health.

Sarracchi's definition provides an intermediate concept, linking the WHO's ideal to <sup>34</sup>contemporary issues of human rights, equity, and justice. Aboriginal Australians incorporate community health and spiritual well-being as core aspects of the definition of health.

These and other definitions introduce valuable concepts that may be used to <sup>35</sup>enrich and revise the current WHO definition of health. A useful starting point for such revision and enrichment might be for the WHO to clarify its philosophy for 'Health' in the 21st century.

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**Stop and Think in English**

**Assignment:** Write your personal definition of health. Do not use any of the descriptions from the WHO health definition. Look for the definition of health from the internet (at least 5 resources), discuss the concept of health with your friends, then answer the following questions "What is health?"

**Definition of 'Health' from the Internet**

**Example:**

*Resource 0: Wikipedia.....*  
*Definition: Health is the level of functional and metabolic efficiency of a living organism. In humans it is the ability of individuals or communities to adapt and self-manage when facing physical, mental, psychological and social changes with environment.....*

**Resource 1:** .....

**Definition:** .....

.....

.....

Resource 2: .....

Definition: .....

Resource 3: .....

Definition: .....

Resource 4: .....

Definition: .....

Resource 5: .....

Definition: .....

Health Definition in Your Own Idea

Health is .....

**Direction:** Look for meanings and synonyms of each given word and write a sentence.

Vocabulary	Synonym / Meaning in English	Sample Sentence
1. conditions		
2. definition		
3. concern		
4. well-being		
5. relatively		
6. state		
7. generally		
8. soundness		
9. somewhat		
10. physician		
11. sanitation		
12. hygiene		
13. diets		
14. fluids		
15. imbalance		
16. proportion		
17. heals		
18. individuals		
19. particularly		
20. physical		
21. mental		
22. infirmity		
23. dynamic		
24. satisfies		
25. demands		
26. free of disease		
27. universal		
28. unlikely		
29. complete		
30. relationship		
31. failure		
32. distinguish		
33. needs		
34. contemporary		
35. enrich		