

What is Health Impact Assessment?

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is often compared to the Environmental Impact Assessments commonly required for development proposals. It may surprise you that health has not always been considered during proposal review and decision-making. HIA is an exciting new process for evaluating how a proposed policy, program, or project would impact community health.

Most importantly, HIA is a community process. HIA can result in a formal report, or in recommendations for how proposals may be changed to protect and bolster health, but the HIA process itself creates lasting effects. Diverse participants develop new relationships and establish processes for collaborating with each other. Health considerations become embedded in decision-making, as everyone from community members to professionals and officials learns about the interaction between health and development.

Approaches to HIA

There are many different ways to approach HIA. Health impacts may be described qualitatively or using precise quantitative estimates. For example, a community conducting an HIA for a road construction project might discuss expected reductions in neighborhood pride or negative mental and respiratory health effects due to increased traffic noise and exhaust. They may also calculate the number of new asthma cases or decibel increase in ambient noise expected if the project goes forward unchanged. The community could then offer recommendations for how to reduce negative impacts, perhaps by incorporating traffic calming measures, pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly streetscapes, or improved transit access. We are still at the cutting edge of HIA, so the possibilities are essentially boundless.

HIA can be used to evaluate anything from the master plan for a new housing development to the configuration of a highway project to a job-training program to guidelines for how to choose the site on which to construct a new school. An HIA can be conducted in a few days or over several months, and can consider any number of health effects. Development, design, and policy decisions can influence a wide variety of community health factors:

- Risk of disease due to air and water toxins
- Physical activity levels
- Crime rates and public safety
- Mental health
- Access to nutritious food
- Access to medical care and availability of appropriate services
- Walking and cycling opportunities
- Noise levels
- Housing availability and affordability
- Job opportunities and salaries
- Injury risks
- Social cohesion, trust, and community pride

HIA is presently a voluntary process, but it benefits from broad participation. The process can be led by and involve a very broad set of people from the community, including residents, public health, designers, businesses, political leaders, and planning commissions. The specific methods used - and the health impacts to be considered - are up to those doing the assessment. Community members can tailor HIA to their specific concerns, the project under consideration, and the resources available for conducting the assessment. In the process, everyone learns new ways of working together to make healthier decisions.

To learn more about this emerging field:
www.feetfirst.info/hia