



# The concept of health

## What is health?

Much has been written about the concept of health. There is a wide variety of views on health, ranging from narrowly technical, disease-orientated views to philosophical accounts emphasising positive health or well-being, self-actualisation and quality of life. There is no correct answer to the question of what health is that can easily be translated into different cultures, contexts and lifestyles. Health, as well as illness, is experienced individually, but also through a number of determinants that shape it, such as living conditions, surrounding environment, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture, age, gender, etc.

Thus, the Shape Up approach emphasises that it is important for all actors involved in the promotion of health and learning about health – adults (e.g. teachers, parents, groups in the community, health professionals, researchers, etc.) as well as children and young people – to define for themselves and engage in dialogue about what health means.

## A few ideas to start up the dialogue

The definitions of health provide a few initial examples about how health could be defined and the reasons why health is important.

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

(WHO, 1947)

“Health is seen as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living; it is a positive concept emphasising social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities.”

(WHO, 1986)

“A man too busy to take care of his health is like a mechanic too busy to take care of his tools.”

(Spanish proverb)

“He who has health has hope and he who has hope has everything.”

(Arabic proverb)

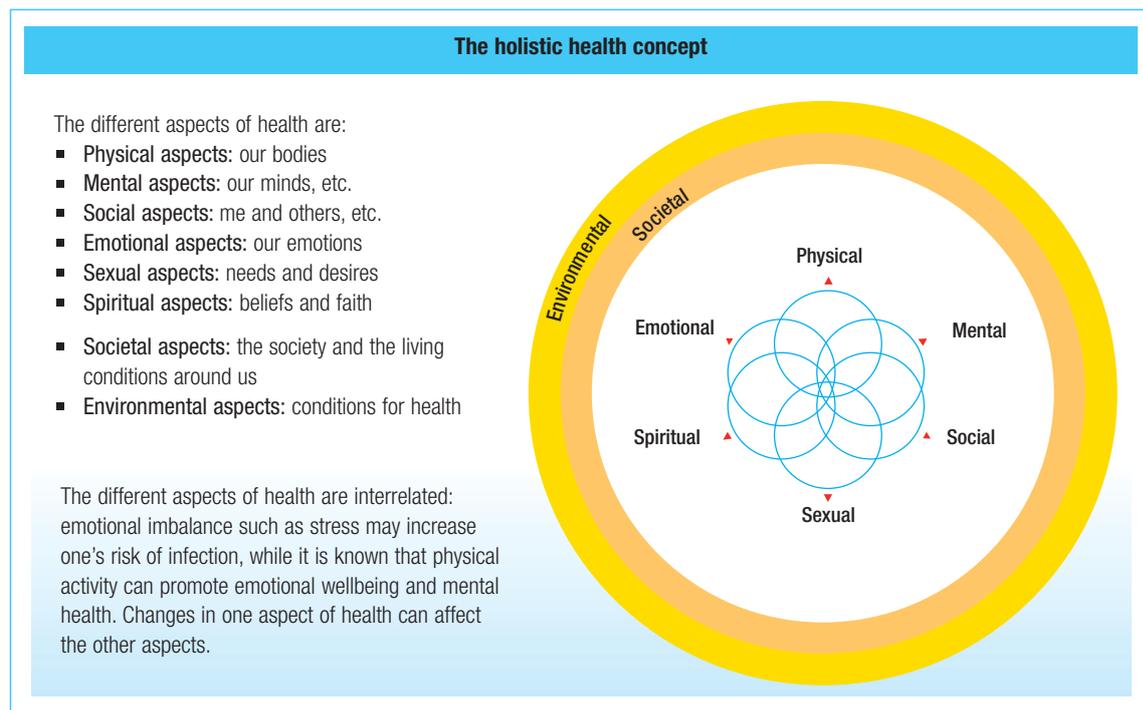
To enter into the dialogue a set of questions could be developed which can also be used with children and young people. *Have a look at the definitions: Which definition do you prefer? Why? What does this definition emphasise as being most important for health? What other definitions do you know?*

### Additional considerations and ideas for discussion

- What does health mean? Is it just the opposite of disease?
- What does disease mean? Is it just the opposite of health?
- Who is responsible for health?
- What affects health?
- Is wellbeing the same as health?
- In the Spanish proverb, health in itself is not seen as an objective, but as a tool. In what way can health be a tool for you?
- The Arabic proverb links health with hope. What is hope and how does it affect health?
- Why is health unequally distributed among people?

### Holistic, broad and positive health

The Shape Up approach emphasises a holistic, broad and positive concept of health. The **holistic health concept** encompasses the body, the mind, and the individual in his or her society<sup>3</sup>.



<sup>3</sup> There are many possible representations of the holistic nature of health. See, for example, *The holistic concept of health*: NAIDOO and WILLS, 1994.

This understanding of health also indicates that health is not only an individual but also a social, as well as a societal issue. Moreover, it implies that it is possible, and preferable, to distinguish between the “social health of individuals”, and the “health of the society”<sup>4</sup>.

The social health of individuals concerns three main aspects: interdependence, a capacity to fulfil interpersonal relationships and an ability to accept responsibility for others and act in socially responsible ways.

The health of the society, on the other hand, concerns the commitment and capacity of a society to address human rights and deal with the determinants of health, that is, to tackle the living conditions causing powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, etc., which are detrimental to health and wellbeing.

Shape Up aims to empower and support individuals, including children and young people, to influence the determinants of health and thus develop the necessary skills and competence to improve the health of the society as well as individual health.

**A broad health concept** contains the importance of both lifestyle and living conditions.

Lifestyle is the way people live, their habits, the choices they make in relation to health, including choices concerning food, exercise, sexual behaviour, tobacco, drugs, etc. Normally, individuals have some power to influence their lifestyle choices.

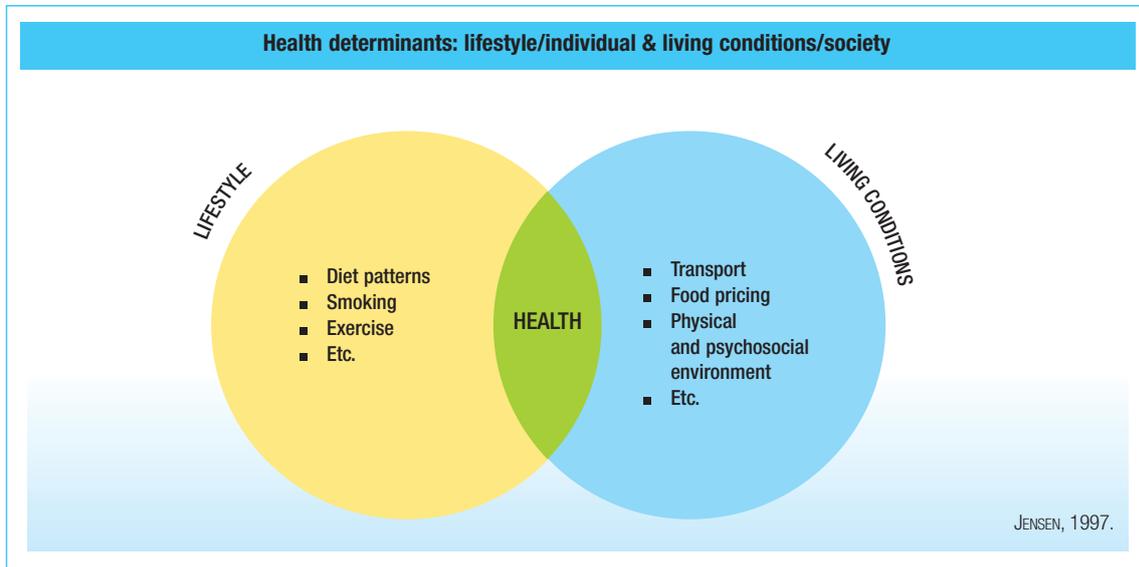
Living conditions refer to the settings in which people live, love and work; that is, to the ways in which the surrounding environment and society provide frameworks that affect an individual’s life. These could be an individual’s working environment, socioeconomic background, culture, the city, the neighbourhood, the economy, etc. The living conditions are more difficult, but not impossible, to change.

Lifestyle and living conditions influence one another. For instance, if people live in a community in which fruit and vegetables are available and not expensive, there is more chance that they will eat more healthily, and this can affect their health.

The Shape Up approach points out that, in order to bring about changes in living conditions and influence the determinants of health, one needs to be “action competent”; that is, know how to work with others to initiate changes, particularly with those who are the key players in making changes happen at different levels: individual, school, local community, city, society, or even globally (see more about action and action competence in the following sections).

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<sup>4</sup> TONES and GREEN, 2004.



A **positive health concept** implies that health is more than merely the absence of disease. Health can be seen as a continuum, rather than a static condition. Positive health, or wellbeing, represents a social and personal resource for quality of life. It is closely connected to people’s (including children and young people’s) ideas about what a “good life” is. Health is created in places in which people live, love, learn, work and play<sup>5</sup>.

In other words, health is created through the interplay between people and their environments, lifestyles and living conditions, and the relationships between people in the context of their everyday lives.

Therefore, to improve health, we need to consider not only individual behaviours and lifestyles, but also the environment, interpersonal relationships and living conditions.

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<sup>5</sup> KICKBUSCH, 1997.



### HEPCOM comment:

#### How to work with the concept of health

In the document “ The concept of health” by Bjarne Bruun Jensen ( 2003) the following model is used to illustrate which factors affect health, and to explain the components of the broad, positive definition of health. The first two components correspond to WHO’s definition of health and include the absence of illness and a sense of well-being (the positive definition of health). The third and fourth components are the factors of lifestyle and living conditions (the broader definition of health).

1 Negative definition of health (absence of illness)	2 Positive definition of health (sense of well- being)
3 Narrow definition of health (life style)	4 Broad definition of health (living conditions)

Let the children discuss the model and find examples. Let them find ways to change an activity from one square to another.

Use the exercise: What is Health for me? You find it on [www.hepcom.eu](http://www.hepcom.eu).