

HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT FACTSHEET

What Is a Health Impact Assessment?

The formal definition of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is “a combination of procedures, methods and tools that systematically judges the potential, and sometimes unintended effects of a proposed project, plan or policy on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. HIA identifies appropriate actions to manage those effects.”

In practice, HIA is a useful way to

- Ensure that health and health disparities are considered in decision-making using an objective and scientific approach.
- Engage stakeholders in the process.

How Is It Done?

A typical HIA includes six steps:

1. Screening - Determines the need and value of a HIA;
2. Scoping - Determines which health impacts to evaluate, the methods for analysis, and the work plan for completing the assessment;
3. Assessment - Provides: a) a profile of existing health conditions; b) evaluation of potential health impacts;
4. Recommendations – provides strategies to manage identified adverse health impacts
5. Reporting - Includes development of the HIA report and communication of findings and recommendations; and
6. Monitoring - Tracks impacts on decision-making processes and the decision as well as impacts of the decision on health determinants.

Within this general framework, approaches to HIA vary as HIAs are tailored to work with the specific needs, timeline and resources of each particular project.

When Is It Done?

HIA describes diverse methods used to inform policy-makers about how policies, plans, programs, or projects can affect health, health behaviors, and social resources necessary for health. Generally HIA should be carried out *before* a decision is made or policy is implemented to allow the HIA to inform the policy, plan, program or project.

Is HIA Expensive?

Because HIA can be described as a spectrum of practice, there is no standard cost for conducting one. Health Impact Assessments are highly tailored to work with individual budgets: rapid HIAs can cost as little as \$20,000, while comprehensive HIAs can cost upwards of \$150,000. Scale and approaches of HIA vary based on:

- The depth and breadth of issues analyzed
- The types of research methods employed
- The extent to which stakeholders are involved in developing the HIA
- The way that HIA findings are used
- The relationship to regulatory requirements.

HOW DOES IT START?

An HIA can be initiated by public health practitioners, community groups and advocacy organizations, affected stakeholders, responsible public agencies, or policy-makers who are interested in the consideration of health in a decision-making process. HIA can also be required by project-specific legislation or to comply with environmental impact assessment regulations.

What Does an HIA Produce?

Generally, a completed HIA results in a report that documents the HIA process as well as findings. However, the decision-making process will likely inform the communication of HIA findings, and the need for more publicly-accessible materials. For example, the identification of key messages (e.g., positive and negative impacts on health), audiences (e.g., stakeholders, decision-makers) and use of media (e.g., letters, reports, press releases) will likely follow the release of the HIA report, and form the basis of communication strategies.

How Do I Know If an HIA Is Appropriate?

In order to assess whether an HIA is appropriate, one should consider timing, the health impacts of the project, whether the HIA would influence the project, and the capacity of stakeholders and community members to participate. These considerations are key to a successful HIA. Screening, the first step in conducting an HIA, will help you determine if the HIA is appropriate by addressing these considerations.

Is an HIA Ever Required?

Currently, there are few state and no federal regulations that require an HIA. However, because many laws and regulations require the consideration and analysis of health effects on proposed project and plans, an HIA would be a great way to comply with these types of requirements.

What Is the Result of an HIA?

There are two desired outcomes of an HIA. One is to influence plans policies and projects in a way that improves health and diminishes health disparities. The other is to engage community members and stakeholders so they understand what impacts health and how to advocate for improving health.

Setting the Record Straight

Fact: HIA is not expensive

The cost of an HIA can vary, depending on the needs and constraints of participants and the intricacies of the project. However, HIAs typically cost much less than environmental reviews. And, more importantly, even a very long complex HIA will not cost as much as the negative health outcomes that may be associated with a proposed project, plan, or policy.

Fact: HIA is time not consuming

Like cost, the length of an HIA can vary but even a long complicated HIA is more likely to reduce the time associated with a project. This is because when recommendations from a well-executed HIA (e.g., one that involves community stakeholders) are implemented or assessed, the project is less likely to get held up in the approval process or by litigation.

Fact: HIA can speed development

Where development plans or projects have negative health impacts, the role of the HIA is to identify mitigations and recommendations. By assessing and adopting feasible mitigations, a development becomes more likely to gain support and be approved.

Fact: HIA is objective

An HIA pulls together the best available evidence to make a broad statement about impacts.

Fact: HIA can add value to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

Although HIA practitioners think it should, generally EIA does not consider health outcomes. The language of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and state environmental policies supports the inclusion of a robust, systematic approach to public health and should consider all potentially significant direct, indirect and cumulative health impacts associated with the proposed action and alternatives. HIA provides this type of health analysis. HIA can be done independent of EIA or can be integrated into an EIA process.