Global health: a reading map

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Global health is the study and practice of improving health and achieving health equity for people everywhere, across national borders. It draws on medicine, public health, economics, ethics, data science and the lived experience of communities. Here it is offered as education for our global family: a way to understand how health works in societies everywhere, not advice for any individual's care. This page is a reading map for learners: it groups the main areas of global health, points to official sources, and explains how health information is produced and judged.

On this site

- Health literacy track: twelve lessons in two parts using the site's standard lesson template
- Global health organizations: a directory by type, with official links
- Health data sources: where free global health data lives and how to read it
- Find help: crisis and emergency pointers, with no invented phone numbers
- Unit 24: Public Health, Bioethics & Open Science and Academic methods: how to read evidence

The SDG 3 framing

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 3 is titled "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." Its targets give a widely used map of global health priorities. The list below paraphrases the target topics; read the exact wording and indicators on the UN Sustainable Development Goals page for Goal 3.

- **3.1** · Maternal mortality
- **3.2** · Newborn and under-5 deaths
- **3.3** · AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, neglected tropical diseases, hepatitis and water-borne and other communicable diseases
- **3.4** · Premature deaths from noncommunicable diseases, and mental health and well-being
- **3.5** · Substance abuse, including harmful use of alcohol
- **3.6** · Road traffic deaths and injuries
- **3.7** · Universal access to sexual and reproductive health care
- **3.8** · Universal health coverage, with financial risk protection and access to essential medicines and vaccines
- **3.9** · Illness and death from hazardous chemicals and from air, water and soil pollution
- **3.a** · Tobacco control (WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control)

- **3.b** · Research, development and access for vaccines and medicines
- **3.c** · Health financing and the health workforce
- **3.d** · Early warning, risk reduction and management of health risks

Categories of global health

There is no single official list of health domains. The groupings below follow the way the World Health Organization's health topics and the SDG 3 targets organise the field, so categories overlap. Each links to the official page for that area. Summaries are our own short descriptions, and pages on those sites are updated by their publishers, so check them for the latest guidance.

Jump to a category

1. Communicable (infectious) diseases
2. Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)
3. Maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health
4. Sexual and reproductive health and rights
5. Mental health and psychosocial well-being
6. Substance use
7. Nutrition and food security
8. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)
9. Injuries, violence and road safety
10. Environmental, occupational and climate health
11. Health systems, primary care and universal health coverage (UHC)
12. Vaccines, immunization and medicines
13. Health emergencies and pandemic preparedness
14. One Health and antimicrobial resistance (AMR)
15. Ageing, disability and long-term care
16. Digital health, health information and literacy
17. Health equity and social determinants

1. Communicable (infectious) diseases

HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, viral hepatitis, neglected tropical diseases and other infections that spread between people, animals or through water and food. Prevention, testing, treatment and vaccination are the main levers.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.3

- HIV and AIDS
- Tuberculosis
- Malaria
- Hepatitis

- Neglected tropical diseases

2. Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)

Long-term conditions such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory disease. They share risk factors including tobacco use, harmful alcohol use, unhealthy diets and physical inactivity, and they need care that lasts over years.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.4, 3.a

- NCD overview (WHO fact sheet)
- Cardiovascular diseases
- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Chronic respiratory diseases
- Tobacco

3. Maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health

Care before, during and after pregnancy, safe childbirth, newborn care, childhood illness and the particular health needs of adolescents.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.1, 3.2

- Maternal health
- Newborn health
- Child health
- Adolescent health

4. Sexual and reproductive health and rights

Access to information, family planning and sexual and reproductive health services, delivered with respect for rights and consent.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.7

- Sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Family planning and contraception (fact sheet)
- UNFPA

5. Mental health and psychosocial well-being

Conditions such as depression and anxiety, as well as everyday well-being, stress and recovery. Care ranges from community support to specialist services, and stigma is a major barrier worldwide.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.4

- Mental health (WHO topic)
- Mental health: strengthening our response
- Depression (fact sheet)

- Suicide (fact sheet)

6. Substance use

Harmful use of alcohol, tobacco and other psychoactive substances, and the prevention and treatment services around them.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.5

- Alcohol
- Drugs (psychoactive)
- UNODC

7. Nutrition and food security

Undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity, healthy diets and physical activity. Nutrition connects health with food systems, poverty and emergencies.

Related SDG 3 targets: 2 and 3

- Nutrition (WHO topic)
- Malnutrition (fact sheet)
- Healthy diet (fact sheet)
- Physical activity (fact sheet)

8. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

Safe drinking water, sanitation and handwashing prevent many infectious diseases. Access is uneven between and within countries.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.9, 6

- WASH (WHO topic)
- Drinking-water (fact sheet)
- Sanitation (fact sheet)
- WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme

9. Injuries, violence and road safety

Road traffic injuries, other unintentional injuries, and violence including violence against women and children.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.6

- Road safety
- Road traffic injuries (fact sheet)
- Injuries
- Violence against women (fact sheet)

10. Environmental, occupational and climate health

Air pollution, hazardous chemicals, heat and extreme weather, unsafe workplaces and other environmental exposures that shape health.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.9, 13

- Air pollution
- Climate change and health (fact sheet)
- Environmental health
- Occupational health

11. Health systems, primary care and universal health coverage (UHC)

The people, facilities, financing and governance that deliver care. UHC means everyone can use the quality health services they need without financial hardship.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.8, 3.c

- Universal health coverage
- UHC (fact sheet)
- Primary health care
- Health workforce
- Health systems governance

12. Vaccines, immunization and medicines

How vaccines are developed, tested, monitored and delivered, and how access to safe, effective and affordable medicines and vaccines is improved.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.b

- Vaccines and immunization
- Immunization coverage (fact sheet)
- How do vaccines work?
- Vaccine safety (Q&A)

13. Health emergencies and pandemic preparedness

Detecting, preparing for and responding to outbreaks, disasters and conflicts, including the International Health Regulations that guide countries.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.d

- Health emergencies
- Pandemics
- International Health Regulations
- Disease Outbreak News

14. One Health and antimicrobial resistance (AMR)

The health of people, animals and ecosystems is linked. AMR occurs when germs stop responding to medicines, which makes common infections harder to treat.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.d

- One Health
- One Health (fact sheet)
- Antimicrobial resistance
- AMR (fact sheet)

15. Ageing, disability and long-term care

Healthy ageing, care for older people and people with disabilities, and accessible services across the life course.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.8

- Ageing
- Ageing and health (fact sheet)
- Disability
- Disability and health (fact sheet)

16. Digital health, health information and literacy

Digital tools in health care, health data systems, health literacy and the “infodemic” of accurate and misleading information that surrounds health topics.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3.8, 3.d

- Digital health
- Health literacy (fact sheet)
- Infodemic
- Health promotion

17. Health equity and social determinants

Where people are born, live, work and age strongly shape their health. Equity work asks who is being missed by averages and why.

Related SDG 3 targets: 3 (all targets)

- Health equity
- Social determinants of health
- Social determinants (fact sheet)

Reading health evidence

Health news is full of claims that sound certain and are not. Useful questions to put to any claim are who produced it, what kind of study it came from, whether the effect is described in absolute or relative terms, and whether independent reviews agree. The site’s own method pages explain the habits in more detail:

- Academic methods and open syllabus
- Unit 17: Scientific Inquiry, Models & Falsifiability
- Unit 24: Public Health, Bioethics & Open Science
- Source Reader
- Health literacy track

Systematic reviews from Cochrane and the Informed Health Choices key concepts are widely used starting points for judging treatment claims.

WHO in other languages

The World Health Organization publishes in six official languages. These links open WHO's own language home pages; not every page on its site exists in every language. The Pledge's own translations are separate and are marked as unreviewed; see languages and volunteer language review.

- English
- Arabic
- Chinese
- Français (French)
- Russian
- Español (Spanish)

If you need help now

If someone is in immediate danger, contact your local emergency services. For emotional distress or crisis support, see Find help.

About these sources

Links go to official pages of the organisations named. External links do not imply endorsement, and the organisations have not reviewed this page. Health guidance changes, so treat these pages as a starting point and confirm current advice with a qualified professional or your national health authority.

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