WHAT IS A HEALTH-IMPACT ASSESSMENT (HIA)?

In today’s society, issues that were once individual concerns, such as smoking and obesity, have ballooned into public health epidemics. Those outside of the traditional health sector are being called on to consider how the choices that they make impact the well-being of whole populations. An HIA is “a combination of procedures, methods, and tools by which a policy, program, or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population” (1999 Gothenburg consensus statement*). Although relatively new to the United States, the HIA is comparable to such measures in other fields (e.g., environmental-impact assessments) and is already part of mandated processes in other parts of the world.

HOW IS A HEALTH-IMPACT ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED?

One of the most compelling facts about the HIA is that it allows for utilization of a variety of tools and input from diverse individuals and organizations. HIAs can vary in complexity, duration, and even timing with respect to the plan being evaluated. HIAs can be conducted before, during, or even after a project’s implementation and can involve as little or as many resources as are available. The simplest and quickest HIAs can be conducted in days and simply evaluate existing data, while the most complex may take months (or even years) to carry out and include a variety of assessment methods.

WHAT IS DONE WITH RESULTS OF A HEALTH-IMPACT ASSESSMENT?

Although conducting an HIA is a great way to become aware of potential health impacts of a project, steps must be in place to ensure the results are put to good use. Once potential health impacts of a proposal or project are identified, parts of the proposed plan may be adjusted to minimize any predicted negative health impacts. After changes are made, careful monitoring and close evaluation of project implementation become integral components of any HIA procedure.


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MAJOR STEPS OF A HEALTH-IMPACT ASSESSMENT

There are five major steps in conducting an HIA. The process begins with screening to determine whether a proposal or plan should be assessed and proceeds through the major steps of scoping for key health issues, analyzing the proposal/plan for potential health impacts, reporting impacts to decision-makers, and monitoring actions taken. Each of the major steps is illustrated and further described in the figure.

HEALTH-IMPACT ASSESSMENT AT WORK: TOWN CENTER REDEVELOPMENT

A community seeking to redevelop a town center may wonder how the changes would impact the health of its residents. Local health departments can work with community members and key stakeholders to identify health indicators and evaluate how these indicators may be impacted. If businesses are added, how will this impact traffic flow? How would increases or decreases in traffic affect the health of individuals? How may area water and air supply be affected? Once hypothetical health outcomes are determined, planners can be advised on the best way to proceed with the town center–redevelopment project. Careful monitoring of the revised plan will assure that recommended changes are followed.

To download a copy of *The Health-Impact Assessment (HIA): A Useful Tool*, please visit IPA’s online Healthy Delaware Toolkit - [www.ipa.udel.edu/healthyDEtoolkit](http://www.ipa.udel.edu/healthyDEtoolkit).