



# Preparing for a Career in Public Health

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## What are the career opportunities in public health?

While there are dozens of specialties in public health, most career opportunities are found in the following fields: Health Services Administration, Biostatistics, Epidemiology, Health Education/ Behavioral Science, Environmental Health, International Health, Nutrition, Public Health Practice/ Program Management, and Biomedical Laboratory.

Sample job titles include: Public Health Management Analyst, Director of Programs and Services, Health Communications Specialist, Research Scientist, Environmental Health Intelligence Analyst, and Manager of Breastfeeding Initiatives.

## Why pursue a career in public health?

- **Public health is an exciting and growing field of study.** The field challenges its professionals to confront complex health issues, such as improving access to healthcare, controlling infectious disease, and reducing environmental hazards, violence, substance abuse, and injury.
- **Public health is a diverse and dynamic field.** Public Health professionals come from varying educational backgrounds and can specialize in an array of fields. A host of specialists, including teachers, journalists, researchers, administrators, environmentalists, demographers, social workers, laboratory scientists, and attorneys, work to protect the health of the public.
- **Public health is a field geared toward serving others.** Public health professionals serve local, national, and international communities. They are leaders who meet the many exciting challenges in protecting the public's health today and in the future.
- **Public health is a rewarding field.** The field of public health offers great personal fulfillment - working towards improving people's health and well being is a rewarding day's work.

## Who should consider a degree in public health?

Public health is a field that offers an abundance of job opportunities to suit a variety of interests and skills. Whether you are more interested in crunching numbers, conducting research, or working with people, there is a place for you in the field of public health.

## Where do public health professionals work?

Public health professionals work in both the public and private sectors.

- The jobs available at local, state, or federal health departments range from Food Safety Inspectors to Health Educators; from Policy Analysts to Epidemiologists.
- Other public health professionals will find work in university systems as researchers.
- Those interested in working for a non-profit organization can find jobs in health advocacy, policy, or research for organizations such as the American Cancer Society, the Red Cross, or a local non-profit that focuses on specific health issues.
- Still other public health professionals will find work in the private sector - working in randomized control trials for pharmaceutical companies or for health insurance companies.

## **What undergraduate major should I choose?**

Students of public health come from a variety of educational backgrounds, but there is coursework that can better prepare you for the field of study you choose. For example, coursework in biology and mathematics is highly recommended for students who plan to concentrate in epidemiology or biostatistics. For Behavioral Sciences, Health Education or Global Health, courses in sociology, psychology, education or anthropology are beneficial. Health Services Administration students find that a business background is a plus. A biology or chemistry background is helpful for the study of Environmental Health. All schools of public health require competence in effective communication (both verbal and written); therefore, students should try to take advantage of undergraduate opportunities to hone these skills.

## **How can a graduate degree in public health enhance my career opportunities?**

Many public health jobs require a graduate degree in public health. A graduate degree gives public health professionals a competitive edge over other professionals and enables professionals to:

- Gain knowledge of the factors which influence local, national and global legislative and social policies
- Apply broad-based, state-of-the-art quantitative and qualitative skills needed for problem solving
- Develop multidisciplinary and collaborative strategies for solving health-related problems
- Enhance communication skills by working with diverse populations
- Be positioned for a leadership role in health promotion and disease prevention

## **Choosing a Public Health Graduate School**

### **Which school of public health should I attend?**

Look for Council of Education for Public Health (CEPH) accredited schools of public health. All accredited schools meet rigorous accreditation standards and each has unique strengths in research, service and education. For a complete list of accredited schools of public health, see the ASPH website at: [schools.asph.org](http://schools.asph.org).

### **What are the entrance requirements?**

While schools of public health look for high graduate entrance exam scores and GPA, other aspects of an applicant's record, such as a career achievement, professional experience, and clarity of career goals also are equally important. Admissions decisions are based on an overall assessment of the ability of the applicants to successfully complete the degree track area selected. Each program or track within a given department may set additional requirements for admission, therefore, applicants should refer to the individual programs for details.

### **What is the difference between the different degrees? How do I choose the one that's right for me?**

There are many different degree programs for those that interested in studying public health. Some of the programs include:

- MPH = Master of Public Health
- MHA = Master of Health Administration
- MHSA = Master of Health Services Administration
- MSPH = Master of Science in Public Health
- DrPH = Doctor of Public Health
- PhD = Doctor of Philosophy

In general, the MPH degree will include coursework in a number of public health disciplines, such as administration, epidemiology, environmental health, and behavioral health. Specialized degrees such as a Master of Health Administration will be more focused on a specific topic.

Another distinction between degrees is the professional degree versus the academic degrees. Professional degrees generally have a greater orientation towards practice in public health settings. The MPH, DrPH, and MHA are example of degrees which are geared towards those who want careers as practitioners of public health in traditional health departments, managed care organizations, community-based organizations, hospitals, consulting firms, international agencies, state and federal agencies, among others.

Academic degrees are more oriented toward students wishing to seek a career in academics and research rather than public health practice. Examples of academic degrees are the MS , PhD, and ScD. Each school of public health can tailor their degree programs significantly. Student interested in getting a degree in public health should check with individual schools for more information on specific degree programs.

### **Why should I consider a dual degree in public health?**

Dual degrees are available to those that are pursuing degrees or have degrees in fields including (but not limited to) nursing, physical therapy, speech-language pathology, law, counseling, public service, business, dentistry, and medicine. At many schools of public health, people with an advanced degree are eligible for an accelerated MPH program. A public health degree will help those in other fields understand the principles of public health and apply these principles to their practices.

### **Additional Resources**

**What is Public Health:** <http://www.whatispublichealth.org>

**American Public Health Association:** [www.apha.org](http://www.apha.org)

**Association of Schools of Public Health:** [www.asph.org](http://www.asph.org)

**List of accredited programs and links to each program:** <http://www.asph.org/document.cfm?page=200#>

**Association for Prevention Teaching and Research:** [www.aptrweb.org](http://www.aptrweb.org)

**U. S. Department of Education:** [www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html)

**Bureau of Health Professions:** <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/>

**Council on Linkages between Academia and Public Health Practice:** [www.phf.org/link.htm](http://www.phf.org/link.htm)

**Council of Accredited MPH Programs:** [www.mphprograms.org](http://www.mphprograms.org)

Information compiled from: <http://www.whatispublichealth.org/faqs/index.html>