

CONCEPT
EXPLAINER

WHAT IS

Prevention

swipe



Prevention in public health

is about taking action early to help people stay healthy, reduce the risk of illness and injury, and stop health problems from starting, getting worse, or happening again. Prevention is not just about healthcare. It is about improving the wider determinants of health, the social, economic, and environmental conditions that shape health and wellbeing.



Prevention matters because

much ill health is avoidable and driven by social and economic inequalities. People living in more deprived areas experience higher levels of preventable harm, making prevention essential for improving health outcomes, reducing inequalities, and easing pressure on public services. By addressing the causes of poor health, a preventative approach can improve population health and strengthen the conditions that support good health and wellbeing.



Prevention is commonly

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described at three levels.

Primary prevention focuses on addressing the underlying causes of poor health and inequality, building resilience and preventing problems from arising through population-level action, including the work of third sector and community organisations.

Secondary prevention focuses on identifying risks or signs of a problem and takes early action to prevent it from developing or worsening.

Tertiary prevention supports people with existing conditions to reduce complications, maintain wellbeing and improve quality of life.



Despite its clear benefits, embedding prevention and moving to a prevention-focused system can be challenging. It requires long-term investment, strong collaboration across sectors, and a commitment to improving future outcomes while managing immediate pressures. The benefits of prevention may also take time to emerge, making it difficult to prioritise alongside more urgent demands.



A strong prevention

approach requires action across the whole system, from addressing upstream social and economic factors that shape health, such as income, education and housing, to delivering effective downstream services and care. Shifting the balance towards primary prevention is key to improving health outcomes, reducing inequalities, and building a more sustainable health and care system for the future.



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