

What Makes a Community Healthy?

Most of us know we should be exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, eating more vegetables, not smoking, watching less television, and finding better ways to manage our stress. However, most of us struggle with one or more of these commitments. Why is that?

Often, the factors that determine our health have far less to do with the day-to-day decisions we make regarding our health practices and more to do with the social and physical circumstances that surround us. Did you know that people who live in poverty are more likely to develop diabetes, or that those who work in stressful workplaces are more likely to experience mental health problems? There are many factors that impact our health over which we have little control. Consider the experience of the Leger family:

Employment
and working
conditions

Jess is a young mother of two pre-school children living in rural New Brunswick. Her husband Matt always worked in the forestry industry, but due to drastic changes to this industry in recent years, he **lost his job** a few months ago and is now forced to leave the province for work. **His new job doesn't pay as well as the old one** and they no longer have health benefits. Jess works part time at the local grocery store and the kids go to a home daycare. The extra expenses related to Matt's travel and the cost of daycare means there isn't enough money to make ends meet. Jess **wishes she had gone to college so she could be earning more money to support her family, and doing more interesting work**. She is expecting their third child in a couple of months and she worries that the **long shifts on her feet may be harmful for the baby**. She misses her husband, and finds that looking after the kids and the family's affairs by herself is tiring and stressful. They only have one vehicle which Matt takes with him when he works away. Jess is really worried about how they will cope once the new baby is born.

Income &
Social Status

Education
& Literacy

Healthy Child
Development

Sounds tough, right? Fortunately, Jess lives close to her Mom, Dad and sister, who help her out by giving her rides to her doctor's appointments and looking after the children occasionally. Jess really enjoys the parent and tot group at the community centre in her neighbourhood. She's made a new friend there and they get together with their kids at the playground on weekends. **The playground used to be run-down, but some members of local service clubs and businesses donated time, skill and money to improve the play structure and make it safer**. Once a month, Jess joins others at the local health centre to cook a week's worth of meals together and to socialize. They package the food up and take it home and freeze it; having healthy meals on hand is a bonus when she gets home from work, and the cost of these meals is reasonable since they all chip in. **The nurse at the health centre told her about a walking group and Jess is feeling more energetic and less stressed since she started exercising regularly with others. She's also thinking of talking to the Social Worker there about her worries**.

Physical
Environments

Health
Services

Many factors have an influence on our health - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Although Jess' situation is difficult, she is grateful to have support from family and friends, as well as services offered in her community. A healthy community is a place where the community works together to make healthy choices easier, regardless of income level.