

Norwegian Public Health Act

The new Public Health Act will be introduced in Norway from 1 January 2012. The purpose of this Act is to contribute to societal development that promotes public health and reduces social inequalities in health. Public health work shall promote the population's health, well-being and good social and environmental conditions, and contribute to the prevention of mental and somatic illnesses, disorders or injuries. The Act establishes a new foundation for strengthening systematic public health work in the development of policies and planning for societal development based on regional and local challenges and needs. The Act provides a broad basis for the coordination of public health work horizontally across various sectors and actors and vertically between authorities at local, regional and national level. Only by integrating health and its social determinants as an aspect of all social and welfare development through intersectoral action, can good and equitable public health be achieved.

Multiple stakeholders

The municipalities, county authorities and central government authorities are all important actors in the efforts to promote public health and reduce social inequalities in health. This Act shall ensure that municipalities, county authorities and central government health authorities implement measures and coordinate their activities in the area of public health work. Promotion of participation and collaboration with stakeholders such as voluntary sector is an important aspect of good public health work. Central government health authorities have a duty to support the public health work of the municipalities among others by making available information and data to monitor public health and health determinants at local level. The Act aims to facilitate long-term, systematic public health work.

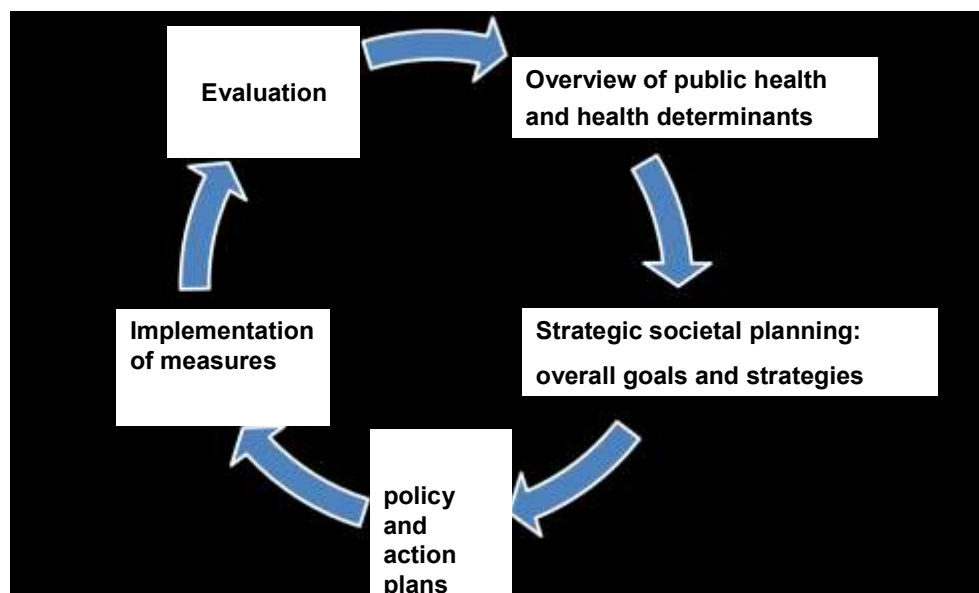
Principles of public health

The Act is based on five fundamental principles that shall underpin policies and action to improve population health. The principles are:

- **Health equity:** Health inequities arise from the societal conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age – the social determinants of health. Social inequities in health form a pattern of a gradient throughout society. Levelling up the gradient by action on the social determinants of health is a core public health objective. A fair distribution of societal resources is good public health policy.
- **Health in all policies:** Equitable health systems are important to public health, but health inequities arise from societal factors beyond health care. Impact on health must be considered when policies and action are developed and implemented in all sectors. Joined up governance and intersectoral action is key to reduce health inequities.
- **Sustainable development:** Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Public health work need to be based on a long term perspective.
- **Precautionary principle:** If an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing harm to the public or to the environment, the absence of scientific consensus that the action or policy is harmful, cannot justify postponed action to prevent such harm.
- **Participation:** Public health work is about transparent, inclusive processes with participation by multiple stakeholders. Promotion of participation of civil society is key to good public health policy development.

Systematic public health work

One of the main features of the Act is that it places responsibility for public health work as a whole-of-government and a whole-of-municipality responsibility rather than a responsibility for the health sector alone. In public health work the municipalities must involve all sectors for the promotion of public health, not just the health sector.



The Act builds on a broad determinant perspective on public health work. Overview of public health and health determinants constitutes the starting point for evidence based public health work. Based on a local assessment of the public health challenges, public health policy development must be an integrated part of ordinary societal and spatial planning and administration processes in counties and municipalities and in other social development strategies.

Instead of detailed requirements, the Act prescribes procedural requirements that will provide the municipalities and counties with a foundation for systematic and long-term public health work across the sectors, based on the municipalities' own planning and administration systems. The municipality shall implement the measures that are necessary for meeting the municipality's public health challenges. This may, for example, encompass measures relating to childhood environments and living conditions, such as housing, education, employment and income, physical and social environments, physical activity, nutrition, injuries and accidents, tobacco use, alcohol use and use of other psychoactive substances.