

Be Your Own Health Champion

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All people have the basic human right to obtain their full potential of good health and well-being. Unfortunately, it's an unlevel playing field when it comes to health, as disparities — or unfair differences in level or treatment — exist in the U.S. health system. These health disparities make it challenging for certain groups of people more so than others to gain access to quality healthcare and health resources. You may have even personally experienced health disparities when trying to receive care, so that's why it's up to you to be your own champion when it comes to your health. Start by becoming more informed about the health disparities that exist in U.S. healthcare and what you can do about them so that you can achieve the most optimal level of health to live your best life possible.

Health disparities and health equity

The term "health disparities" refers to the preventable differences in health among certain groups of people who are defined by social, economic, demographic, geographic, or other measurements of inequality, including age, sex, gender, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation. These differences in health are in reference to the burden of disease, injury, violence, or in opportunities to achieve optimal health.¹

"Health equity" refers to the absence of these health disparities, in which all individuals are valued equally. It's "the attainment of the highest level of health for all people,"² enabling everyone to have fair and just access, opportunity, and resources to lead healthy lives.

Unfortunately, health equity has yet to be achieved. Due to ongoing discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice in systematic and institutional processes, health disparities continue to exist, thereby leading to certain groups of people being underrepresented and underserved.

Social determinants of health (SDOH)

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), SDOH are the nonmedically related factors that greatly impact health outcomes (e.g., mortality, morbidity, life expectancy, health status). They refer to the environmental conditions where people are born into, grow, live, work, play, and age that have a major influence on people's day-to-day living — including their health, well-being, and overall quality of life. At a broader level, SDOH also include structural determinants, which are the political, economic, social, legal, and economic factors within systems and institutions that greatly influence the distribution of power and resources, thereby contributing to health inequities for certain groups of people.

Examples of SDOH include, but aren't limited to, the following:

- **Physical environment** – Housing, safety, neighborhoods, transportation, parks and playgrounds
- **Education** – Early childhood development, language and literacy skills, vocational training, and higher education
- **Economic stability** – Employment, income, expenses, debt, medical bills, and support opportunities and working life conditions
- **Healthcare** – Affordable health coverage, quality of care, and provider availability
- **Food** – Hunger and access to affordable, nutritious foods
- **Community/social context** – Community engagement, social integration, stress, discrimination, and support systems

Studies suggest that SDOH are the primary influences of people's health behaviors and health outcomes.³ For example, people who don't have access to affordable healthy foods are less likely to have good nutrition, which raises their risk of certain health conditions like heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, and diabetes— conditions that statistically have a higher impact on communities of color. In addition, systemic racism creates inequities across SDOH, thus negatively affecting people's physical and mental well-being.

In recent years, several initiatives have emerged, such as [Healthy People 2030](#) and [REACH 2023](#), to appropriately address SDOH. These initiatives aim to systematically identify and eliminate long-standing health disparities and improve the overall health system in the U.S. with the goal of achieving health equity among all individuals in society.

Building trust in your interventional cardiologist →

Receiving a new diagnosis of a heart condition can be frightening, worrisome, and overwhelming. If your diagnosis requires ongoing care with an interventional cardiologist, developing a positive patient-doctor relationship is crucial.

How to assess the competency of your doctor →

Choosing a doctor is one of the most important decisions you'll make for your health. Whether you already have a doctor or are trying to find a new one, it can be stressful and overwhelming to determine whether your doctor is the right "fit" for you and your health needs.

References

1. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
2. [CDC](#)
3. [National Institutes of Health \(NIH\), National Library of Medicine \(NLM\)](#)

Improving Patient Care

The Society for Cardiovascular Angiography & Interventions (SCAI) is the leading nonprofit medical society representing invasive and interventional cardiology. Founded in 1978, SCAI's mission is to lead the global interventional cardiovascular community through education, advocacy, research, and quality patient care.

SCAI has dedicated its work to advancing the profession and is the designated society for guidance, representation, professional recognition, education, and research opportunities for invasive and interventional cardiology professionals. For more than 40 years, SCAI has personified professional excellence and innovation globally, fostering a trusted community of more than 4,500 members dedicated to medical advancement and