

Healthy Places: How Environments Influence Health and Wellbeing

Introduction and purpose

Health and wellbeing are influenced not only by individual choices and behaviours, but also by the environments in which people live, work, learn, and spend time. In public health and planning discussions, the term “healthy places” is commonly used to describe physical and social environments that support population health, safety, and wellbeing across the life course.

This guide has been prepared by the Australian Public Interest Alliance (APIA) to provide clear, neutral, and evidence-informed information about healthy places for the Australian public. Its purpose is to explain how environments are understood to influence health and wellbeing, outline key concepts used in public health and planning contexts, and clarify the scope and limits of the “healthy places” concept. The information presented is educational in nature and is intended to support general understanding rather than provide professional, legal, or planning advice.

The concept of healthy places is used across a range of disciplines, including public health, urban planning, transport, housing, and environmental health. In these fields, attention is given to how features of the built and natural environment are associated with physical health, mental wellbeing, and social outcomes at a population level. Examples often discussed include access to green space, housing quality, walkability, transport options, exposure to environmental stressors, and opportunities for social connection.

Importantly, healthy places are not defined by a single feature or design standard. Rather, the term is used to describe a broad set of environmental factors that, taken together, influence how people experience daily life and how communities function. These influences are typically discussed in terms of patterns and associations observed across populations, rather than guarantees of individual outcomes. Living in a particular environment does not determine a person’s health, but research indicates that environments can make healthy choices easier or harder and can shape exposure to health-related risks over time.

Public interest in healthy places has increased alongside greater awareness of chronic disease, mental health, climate-related risks, and social inequality. As these issues have become more prominent, there has been growing recognition that health outcomes are shaped by systems and settings, not only by personal responsibility. The concept of healthy places reflects this broader understanding and is often used to encourage integrated, long-term approaches to health and wellbeing.

This guide adopts a population-level perspective. It focuses on communities and environments rather than individual behaviour and does not advocate for specific policies, developments, or interventions. It does not provide guidance on planning approvals, design standards, or regulatory requirements, and it should not be used as a substitute for professional advice from planners, health practitioners, or other qualified experts.

The guide is intended for a general audience, including community members, educators, and others seeking an overview of how environments are discussed in relation to health and wellbeing. Throughout the guide, care has been taken to use plain language, avoid prescriptive or activist framing, and draw on publicly available information from reputable sources.

What are “healthy places”?

The term “healthy places” is commonly used in public health and planning contexts to describe environments that support health, safety, and wellbeing across populations. Rather than referring to a specific type of location or design, the concept encompasses a broad range of physical, social, and environmental factors that influence how people live and interact in their everyday surroundings.

In public health literature, healthy places are understood as settings that can shape health-related outcomes over time. This includes neighbourhoods, towns and cities, workplaces, schools, transport systems, and public spaces. The focus is on how these settings affect exposure to risks, access to resources, and opportunities for healthy living at a population level, rather than on individual choices alone.

Healthy places are often discussed in contrast to approaches that focus solely on personal behaviour. While individual decisions are important, research consistently shows that environments play a significant role in shaping what choices are available or practical. For example, the availability of safe walking routes, access to public transport, or proximity to essential services can influence daily activity patterns. Similarly, housing quality, noise levels, air quality, and access to green space are associated with physical comfort and wellbeing.

It is important to note that the concept of healthy places does not imply that there is a single “ideal” environment or that all communities should look the same. Australia includes a wide range of settings, from large cities to regional towns and remote areas, each with different characteristics and needs. Healthy places are therefore understood in relative terms, taking into account local context, geography, culture, and resources.

Healthy places also include social and community dimensions. Factors such as a sense of safety, opportunities for social interaction, and access to community facilities are commonly discussed in relation to wellbeing. These aspects are influenced not only by physical design but also by how spaces are used, maintained, and experienced by the people who live in them.

In policy and research discussions, healthy places are often linked to the concept of the “social determinants of health”. This refers to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, and how these conditions influence health outcomes. Environments are a key part of these determinants, alongside factors such as income, education, and employment. The healthy places concept highlights how physical settings interact with these broader social factors.

It is also important to distinguish healthy places from prescriptive planning or design standards. The term is used to describe relationships between environments and health, not to set mandatory requirements or provide professional advice. Discussions of healthy places typically focus on evidence, trends, and associations rather than directives or guarantees.

Overall, healthy places are best understood as environments that, through their physical and social characteristics, are associated with better health and wellbeing outcomes at a population level. This guide uses the term in a descriptive and educational sense, aiming to explain how the concept is used and why it is relevant, rather than to promote specific actions or solutions.

How environments influence health

Health and wellbeing are shaped by a wide range of factors, including biological, social, and environmental influences. In public health research, increasing attention has been given to how physical and social environments are associated with health outcomes across populations. These associations do not mean that environments determine individual health, but they highlight how everyday surroundings can influence exposure to risks and opportunities for wellbeing over time.

One way environments influence health is through physical conditions. Features such as air quality, noise levels, access to shade, and exposure to heat are commonly examined in environmental health research. Poor air quality and excessive noise have been associated with respiratory and cardiovascular concerns, while prolonged exposure to high temperatures can increase health risks, particularly for older people and those with existing conditions. Conversely, environments that provide protection from environmental stressors can support physical comfort and safety.

The built environment also influences opportunities for movement and activity. Research has examined how factors such as walkability, access to public transport, street design, and proximity to destinations are associated with levels of physical activity. Environments that support safe and convenient movement may make it easier for people to incorporate activity into daily routines, while environments that are difficult to navigate or perceived as unsafe may limit these opportunities. These influences operate at a population level and interact with individual preferences and circumstances.

Mental wellbeing is another area where environmental factors are discussed. Elements such as access to green spaces, perceptions of safety, crowding, and noise are often explored in relation to stress, mood, and overall wellbeing. Studies have found associations between certain environmental characteristics and mental wellbeing indicators, although these relationships are complex and influenced by many interacting factors. It is therefore important to interpret such findings carefully and avoid oversimplification.

Social health is also influenced by environments. Public spaces, community facilities, and neighbourhood design can affect opportunities for social interaction and connection. Environments that support inclusion and accessibility may facilitate social engagement, while barriers such as poor transport access or lack of shared spaces can contribute to isolation for some groups. Social connection is widely recognised as an important component of health and wellbeing, and environments can play a role in enabling or limiting these connections.

Environmental influences on health are not experienced equally. Differences in geography, socioeconomic conditions, and infrastructure mean that some communities face greater exposure to environmental risks or have fewer resources to mitigate them. These patterns are often discussed in relation to health equity, highlighting how environmental factors can contribute to unequal health outcomes across populations.

It is important to emphasise that the relationships between environments and health are generally described in terms of associations rather than direct causation. Health outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, and environments interact with personal, social, and economic circumstances. Understanding these interactions helps support informed discussion and highlights the importance of considering environmental context when addressing population health and wellbeing.

Healthy places and inequality

Health and wellbeing are not distributed evenly across populations, and differences in environmental conditions are recognised as one factor that can contribute to unequal health outcomes. In public health discussions, the concept of healthy places is often linked to broader conversations about inequality, access, and fairness in relation to where people live and the resources available to them.

Access to environments that support health can vary significantly depending on location, income, and infrastructure. For example, some communities may have limited access to green space, reliable public transport, or local services, while others benefit from well-maintained public amenities and supportive infrastructure. These differences can influence daily experiences and, over time, may be associated with variations in physical health, mental wellbeing, and social participation.

Geographic location is an important factor in Australia, given the country's mix of metropolitan, regional, and remote communities. Regional and remote areas may face challenges related to distance, service availability, and infrastructure investment, while urban areas may experience issues such as congestion, housing density, and environmental stressors. Each context presents different opportunities and constraints, and healthy places are therefore understood relative to local circumstances rather than against a single standard.

Socioeconomic factors also interact with environmental conditions. Housing quality, neighbourhood safety, and access to amenities are often linked to income and employment patterns. In some cases, communities with fewer resources may experience higher exposure to environmental risks, such as noise, heat, or poor air quality, while having fewer opportunities to mitigate these risks. These patterns are commonly discussed within the framework of the social determinants of health.

It is important to approach discussions of inequality and healthy places carefully and descriptively. The aim of public-interest education in this area is to improve understanding of how environmental factors are distributed and how they relate to health outcomes, rather than to assign blame or promote specific policy responses. Research in this field focuses on identifying patterns and associations, which can inform long-term planning and health promotion efforts.

Children, older people, and individuals with disability may be particularly affected by environmental conditions. For example, access to safe outdoor spaces, appropriate housing, and accessible transport can influence participation and independence. Recognising how different groups experience environments differently is an important aspect of understanding healthy places at a population level.

Discussions of healthy places and inequality also emphasise the importance of considering cumulative effects over time. Environmental exposures and access to supportive settings can influence health trajectories across the life course. This perspective highlights why environments are often included in broader strategies aimed at improving population health and reducing preventable health disparities.

In this guide, healthy places and inequality are discussed to provide context and understanding. The focus remains on explaining how environmental factors relate to health outcomes across populations, rather than advocating for specific interventions.

Healthy places in everyday life

People encounter environments continuously as part of daily life. Neighbourhoods, streets, workplaces, schools, transport systems, and public spaces all shape how individuals move, interact, and experience their surroundings. In discussions about healthy places, attention is given to these everyday settings because of their cumulative influence on health and wellbeing over time.

Everyday environments can affect physical comfort and safety in simple but important ways. Factors such as footpath condition, lighting, shade, noise levels, and access to amenities influence how people experience routine activities like walking, commuting, or spending time outdoors. While these features may seem ordinary, their presence or absence can shape how accessible and usable spaces are for different members of the community.

Workplaces and educational settings are also key everyday environments. The design and condition of buildings, access to natural light, noise management, and opportunities for movement can influence comfort, concentration, and wellbeing. In these settings, healthy places are often discussed in relation to supporting participation and reducing unnecessary stress, rather than maximising productivity or performance.

Public spaces such as parks, libraries, community centres, and town centres play an important role in everyday life. These spaces can support social interaction, recreation, and access to services. How they are located, maintained, and perceived can influence whether people feel comfortable using them. For some individuals, public spaces provide opportunities for connection and activity, while for others, barriers such as distance, accessibility, or safety concerns may limit their use.

Transport environments are another everyday factor commonly discussed in relation to healthy places. Access to reliable and safe transport can influence participation in work, education, healthcare, and social activities. Transport systems also shape exposure to environmental factors such as air quality and noise. Discussions of healthy places often consider how transport environments interact with other aspects of daily life, particularly for people who rely on public or active transport.

Housing is a central everyday environment with significant relevance to health and wellbeing. Housing quality, stability, and location influence exposure to environmental stressors, access to services, and opportunities for rest and privacy. In public health contexts, housing is discussed as a foundational setting that interacts with other environmental factors rather than as an isolated issue.

Importantly, experiences of everyday environments are not uniform. People differ in their needs, preferences, and circumstances. Age, mobility, health status, caregiving responsibilities, and work patterns all shape how environments are experienced. A setting that is accessible and supportive for one person may present challenges for another. Recognising this variability helps avoid oversimplification and supports a more inclusive understanding of healthy places.

In public-interest discussions, healthy places in everyday life are described to improve awareness of how environments are experienced across communities. The focus is on understanding patterns and influences rather than prescribing behaviours or solutions. This perspective supports informed discussion about how environments contribute to wellbeing as part of the broader context of daily life.

What healthy places are not

As interest in healthy places has increased, the term is sometimes used in ways that go beyond its original public health and educational context. Clarifying what healthy places are *not* helps ensure that the concept is understood accurately and used responsibly.

Healthy places are not a planning, design, or development manual. While the concept is discussed in fields such as urban planning and environmental health, it does not provide technical standards, regulatory guidance, or professional advice. This guide does not set out requirements for buildings, infrastructure, or land use, and it should not be used to inform planning decisions or development proposals.

Healthy places are not a guarantee of individual health outcomes. Living or working in a particular environment does not determine a person's health, and no environment can eliminate health risks entirely. Health outcomes are influenced by a complex interaction of biological, social, economic, and environmental factors. Discussions of healthy places focus on associations observed at a population level rather than on predicting outcomes for individuals.

Healthy places are not a substitute for healthcare or social services. Access to quality healthcare, education, housing support, and social services remains essential for health and wellbeing. Environmental conditions can influence health, but they do not replace the need for professional care or community support. This guide does not suggest that environmental improvements alone are sufficient to address health or wellbeing challenges.

Healthy places are not advocacy or lobbying. This guide does not promote specific policies, campaigns, or political positions. Its purpose is to explain how environments are discussed in relation to health and wellbeing, not to argue for particular interventions or to influence decision-making processes. The information presented is descriptive and educational rather than prescriptive.

Healthy places are not the same for every community. Australia's diverse geography means that urban, regional, and remote areas face different environmental conditions and challenges. What supports wellbeing in one setting may not be appropriate or feasible in another. The concept of healthy places recognises this diversity and avoids the idea of a single model or solution.

Healthy places are also not limited to physical design alone. While built and natural features are important, social and economic factors such as community connection, access to services, and inclusion also influence how environments are experienced. Reducing the concept to design features alone risks oversimplifying complex interactions between people and their surroundings.

By clearly defining these boundaries, this guide aims to support accurate understanding of healthy places as a public-interest concept. Recognising what healthy places are not helps prevent misinterpretation and ensures that discussions remain grounded, evidence-informed, and appropriate for a general audience.

Healthy places in Australia

In Australia, the concept of healthy places is discussed across a range of public policy, research, and community contexts. It appears in public health frameworks, urban and regional planning discussions, environmental health research, and strategies aimed at improving population wellbeing. The Australian context is shaped by a combination of geographic diversity, population distribution, climate conditions, and social factors, all of which influence how environments are experienced.

Australia includes major metropolitan centres, regional cities, rural towns, and remote communities, each with distinct environmental characteristics. As a result, healthy places are understood relative to local context rather than against a single national model. Factors such as distance to services, transport availability, climate exposure, housing conditions, and access to public spaces can vary widely between locations and influence daily life in different ways.

Public health discussions in Australia often emphasise the role of environments as part of a broader approach to health promotion and disease prevention. This includes recognising how built and natural environments interact with social and economic conditions to influence health outcomes over time. Australian frameworks commonly stress the importance of long-term planning, evidence-based decision-making, and collaboration across sectors such as health, planning, transport, and environmental management.

Climate and environmental conditions are also an important part of the Australian context. Exposure to heat, bushfire smoke, flooding, and other environmental hazards can affect health and wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable populations. In this setting, healthy places are often discussed in relation to resilience and adaptation, focusing on how environments can reduce risk and support safety without assuming uniform solutions across regions.

Regional and remote communities face distinct considerations. Access to healthcare, education, employment, and essential services can be influenced by distance and infrastructure. At the same time, these communities may benefit from strong social connections, access to natural environments, and local knowledge. Discussions of healthy places in Australia recognise both challenges and strengths, avoiding deficit-based descriptions and acknowledging diversity of experience.

Australian research institutions, government agencies, and not-for-profit organisations contribute to the evidence base on healthy places. This includes studies on environmental determinants of health, evaluations of planning and infrastructure approaches, and population health monitoring. These efforts support informed discussion and help identify patterns and trends relevant to Australian conditions.

Importantly, Australian approaches to healthy places generally avoid treating environments as the sole driver of health outcomes. Instead, they situate environmental factors alongside healthcare access, education, employment, and social support. This balanced perspective reflects an understanding that improving population health requires consideration of multiple, interconnected influences.

In this guide, healthy places in Australia are discussed to provide context and understanding rather than to advocate for specific policies or initiatives.

Further information and reputable resources

This guide has been prepared to support general understanding of how environments are discussed in relation to health and wellbeing. Readers seeking further information are encouraged to consult reliable, evidence-informed sources that provide population-level perspectives and publicly accessible research. The resources listed below are provided for general information only and do not imply endorsement.

Australian public and government resources

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

The AIHW provides national data, analysis, and reporting on health and wellbeing in Australia, including information on environmental and social determinants of health.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/>

Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care

Provides information on population health, preventive health, and the broader factors that influence health and wellbeing.

<https://www.health.gov.au/>

Planning, environment, and place-based health

Infrastructure Australia

Provides research and analysis on infrastructure planning, including how transport, housing, and community infrastructure affect wellbeing.

<https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/>

Planning Institute of Australia (PIA)

Professional body that publishes information and research on planning and the built environment in Australia.

<https://www.planning.org.au/>

(Readers are encouraged to consult relevant state or territory health and planning departments for local information.)

International public-interest organisations

World Health Organization (WHO) — Healthy Cities and Urban Health

Provides global public-interest information on how urban environments influence health and wellbeing.

<https://www.who.int/teams/environment-climate-change-and-health/urban-health>

OECD — Environment and Health

Publishes international research and analysis on environmental conditions and population health outcomes.

<https://www.oecd.org/environment/>

Using information responsibly

When exploring information about healthy places, readers are encouraged to:

- distinguish between educational material and professional or technical advice
- be cautious of sources that promote single solutions or guaranteed outcomes
- consider the relevance of information to local context and circumstances
- recognise that environments interact with many other factors influencing health

Information about healthy places is most useful when understood as part of a broader picture that includes healthcare, social support, economic conditions, and individual circumstances.

About this guide

This guide has been prepared by the Australian Public Interest Alliance (APIA) as part of its public-interest education activities. It is intended to provide general, evidence-informed information about how environments influence health and wellbeing at a population level.

The guide does not provide planning, legal, or professional advice and does not advocate for specific policies, developments, or interventions. External links and references are provided for general information only, and inclusion does not imply endorsement.

By presenting reputable sources and clearly defining scope, APIA aims to support informed discussion and understanding of healthy places in Australia.