



A Guide to Health Impact Assessments for Communities

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Introduction to Health Impact Assessments

WHAT IS A HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT (HIA)?

A Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a systematic process consisting of multiple phases (detailed below) conducted to understand the potential health impacts of a proposed project, (or policy or program). Depending on the time and resources available, an HIA can be conducted at different scales (comprehensive, intermediate, and rapid).



WHY USE AN HIA?

The goal of an HIA is to understand the potential health impacts of a project and provide recommendations for how to maximize positive health impacts and minimize negative ones. An HIA is a neutral process and therefore not a tool used to advocate for a predetermined outcome – it is simply a way to understand the possible implications of the project. An HIA also seeks to understand how these health impacts differentially affect groups within the HIA’s studied population. It is important to note that the results of an HIA will be relevant solely to the population that the HIA originally set out to look at and cannot be extrapolated beyond that population.

WHEN CAN AN HIA BE USED?

HIAs are conducted on projects in a variety of different sectors (city planning, air quality, built environment, food accessibility, transportation, housing, and more) and for a wide range of geographic scales (local, state, national, international). Due to this wide applicability, HIAs could be conducted for almost any proposed project, but this is not always possible or necessary, and part of the HIA process includes deciding if it may be useful for a specific decision.

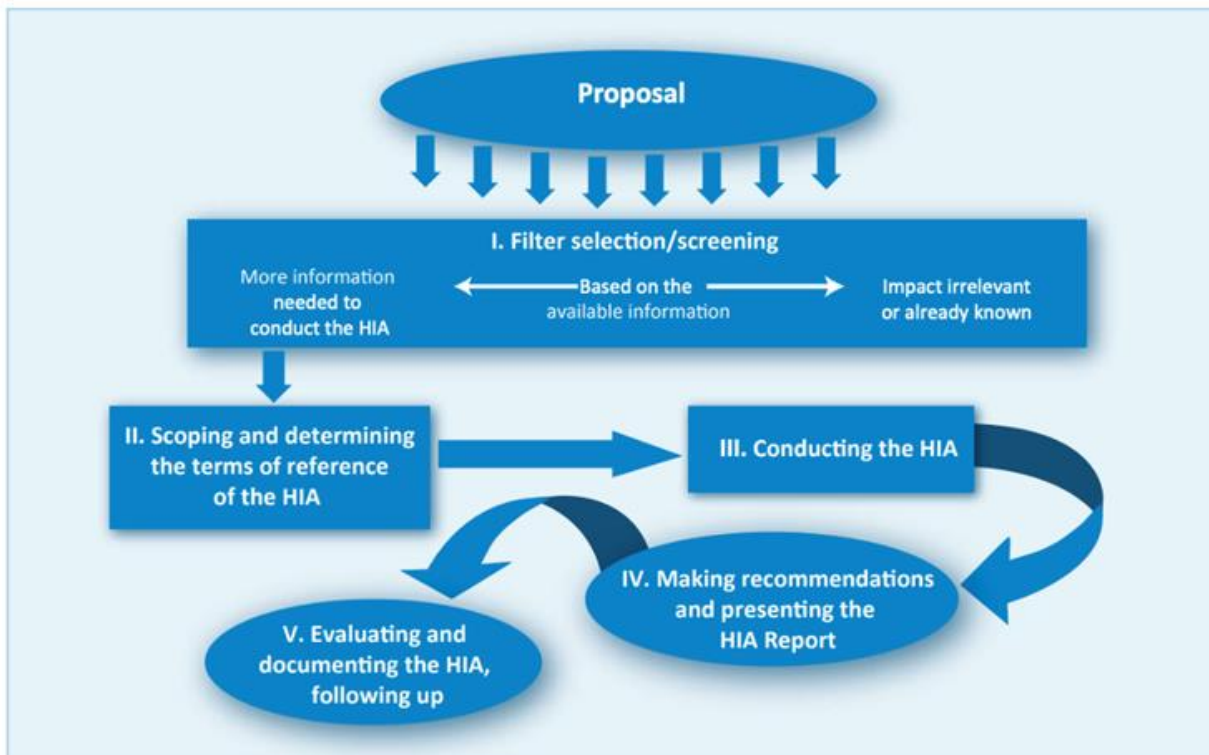
WHO USES AN HIA?

Government agencies, academic institutions, and nonprofit organizations conduct most HIAs. Community organizations may also lead or co-lead HIAs if they receive training or guidance from experienced HIA practitioners.

HOW IS AN HIA DONE?

Essential HIA phases include:

- **Screening:** Decide whether to proceed with an HIA based on whether it is feasible to conduct (staff, time, resources available) for the decision of interest and if it will add value (by providing new information or bringing to light stakeholder concerns or impacts on health).
- **Scoping:** Design the HIA – including scale, goals, geographic range, timeframe, health impacts to consider, impacted population, and other relevant parameters – through the development of a work plan utilizing stakeholder input.
- **Assessment & Recommendations:** Predict potential health impacts of the decision using data – which can include using existing data in scientific literature and gathering data from stakeholders – and formulate recommendations to maximize benefits and minimize harms.
- **Reporting & Dissemination:** Communicate and disseminate assessment findings and recommendations to stakeholders (usually in the form of a report or presentation).
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Evaluate the HIA process (and impact and outcome, if possible) and develop a monitoring strategy to track outcomes, effectiveness of recommendations, and new recommendations needed in the future.



WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL OUTCOMES OF AN HIA?

- **Final HIA report** – A final report provides useful information about potential health impacts and recommendations to maximize positive health impacts and minimize negative ones.
- **Impact decision** (change to policy/project/program/plan) – The impact of an HIA could be very large (e.g., project stopped) or much smaller (e.g., tweak to policy language or project plan).
- **Changes to institutional decision-making practices** – An HIA could lead to health being considered routinely in these practices.
- **Establish or strengthen relationships** – An HIA can promote new relationships and strengthen existing ones between stakeholders, including community members/groups, government agencies, and organizations.
- **Inform decision-makers and community members** – An HIA can help to spread the word among decision-makers and community members about how health can be impacted by policies/projects/programs in non-health sectors.

Community Participation in an HIA

An HIA should involve participation from a group of stakeholders as diverse as possible, including anyone who may gain or lose based on what decision is made. Below you will find information on how you as a community member can participate in an HIA, including the types of activities you may participate in, at what stages in the process you might be involved, what level of involvement or commitment you could have/expect, and what to do if you think an HIA should be conducted for a decision that will impact your community.



PARTICIPATE IN AN ONGOING HIA

Different HIAs will employ different techniques for engaging communities and gathering data from stakeholders. Some of the most common types of community participation opportunities HIAs use include surveys, public meetings, focus groups or small group interviews, community workshops, and advisory or steering committees for the HIA.

Each of these opportunities requires a different level of commitment from participating community members. Completing surveys requires the least amount of time and effort because they involve only answering questions. In contrast, public meetings, community workshops, focus groups, and interviews require more time and effort since these activities entail showing up at a certain location (or virtual meeting) at a certain time (for one or multiple meetings). These types of activities typically occur during the assessment phase of the HIA. Being a member of an advisory/steering committee requires a much larger commitment because it entails showing up to multiple meetings throughout the entire HIA process, which can range from 1 to 2 months to a year (depending on the scale of the HIA). It requires a greater understanding of the full HIA process and calls for participants to play a much more active leadership role with more responsibilities in these meetings and in the HIA process.

Some of the activities that HIA participants may be asked to take part in include:

- Taking a survey by phone, online, via interview, or in-person at a survey site
- Providing your thoughts and experiences with the subject matter of the HIA
- Reviewing and providing input on materials and documents, including guides, educational content, or publications
- Serving as an advisor or in a leadership role to counsel on current and future HIA action
- Attending meetings, town halls, or conferences to provide input on HIA progress



As a community member, you get to decide how involved you would like to become in any HIA based on the time and energy you have available as well as your interest in and experiences related to the relevant topic area. However, community participation is an essential component of any HIA. The greater the community participation, the more likely the full range of community experiences and concerns will be documented and considered in the assessment and recommendations.

INITIATE AN HIA

As mentioned in the introduction section, HIAs are not required or necessary for all project decisions, but if a project being proposed in your community might impact the health of residents, you may want to encourage incorporating an HIA into the decision-making process.

The first step would be to reach out to individuals who are likely to have conducted or have experience with HIAs. These individuals would include representatives of a relevant government agency, people at local or national nonprofits working on the relevant issue, and academic researchers (especially locally) who conduct HIAs or work on the relevant issue. You could also reach out to the Society of Practitioners of Health Impact Assessments (SOPHIA) to see if they know who the best people would be to contact for your location and issue of interest. SOPHIA's general email address is: coordinator@hiasociety.org.

It is important to know that if you get in touch with one or more of these entities, it is not guaranteed that they will be able to conduct an HIA on the project of concern. HIAs can be very time- and resource-intensive to undertake , and the entity you are in touch with may not have the time, experience, or expertise to conduct an HIA on your behalf. If your contact does have experience with HIAs but is unable to conduct one at the time you need it, you could ask them to offer guidance or resources that would allow you to conduct a small-scale HIA on your own if that is something you and other community members are interested in taking on.

Resources for Communities

Guides

Many guides exist for the development and conducting of HIAs. The guides listed below are some of the higher quality guides provided by trusted organizations that incorporate HIAs into their structures:

- [Health Impact Assessment: A Guide for Practice](#) (Health Impact Partners, 2011)
- [Minimum Elements and Practice Standards](#) (MEPS) (SOPHIA, updated in 2022)
- [The Merseyside Guidelines for Health Impact Assessment](#) (International Health IMPACT Assessment Consortium, 2001)
- [Equity-Focused Health Impact Assessment Framework](#) (Australian Collaboration for Health Equity Impact Assessment, 2004)
- [Health Impact Assessment: Concepts and Guidelines for the Americas](#) (WHO & PAHO, 2013)
- [Introduction to HIA](#) (Human Impact Partners, 2014)
- [Rapid Health Impact Assessment Toolkit](#) (Design for Health – University of Minnesota, 2008)
- [SOPHIA Guide for Health in All Policies \(HiAP\) Implementation](#) (SOPHIA, 2023)

[SOPHIA](#) (Society of Practitioners of Health Impact Assessment)

SOPHIA is an international membership organization of HIA practitioners formed in 2011. Their mission is to provide leadership and promote excellence in the practice of health impact assessment and health in all policies. Some of their available resources include:

- [Chronicles of Health Impact Assessment](#) (CHIA) – open access journal
- [List of HIA Publications](#)
- [Model HIA Reports](#)
- [Recorded Webinars & Previous Events](#)
 - [How-To series](#) (currently ongoing) walks through the stages of HIA development.
 - [HIA Practitioner Stories](#)

HIA Databases

[Pew Database](#)

Includes HIAs and other resources like tools, datasets, guides, and more
Search by resource type, sectors, topic areas, drivers of health, states and territories, geographic scope, decision-making levels, community types, organization types, affected populations, document languages, research methods, outcome statement, funding source, and status

[PubMed](#)

PubMed is a database that contains academic literature pertaining to health-related topics. Most HIAs are not published as academic papers, but some academic studies incorporate completed HIAs to try to understand best practices.

[HIA MeSH Term](#): MeSH terms are used in PubMed to index articles based on the topics they cover. To use a MeSH term when searching in PubMed, add [MeSH] after the term to have articles indexed with this word or phrase appear in the search. (Example: "Health Impact Assessment"[MeSH])

Other Helpful Links

- [The Health Impact Assessment \(HIA\) Resource and Tool Compilation: A Comprehensive Toolkit for New and Experienced HIA Practitioners in the U.S.](#) (EPA)
- [Health Impact Assessment Resources](#) (CDC)
- [Academic Training in Health Impact Assessment](#) (Built Environment and Public Health Clearinghouse)

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