

Talk about health

The Story

“Business and the health authority need to work together on this.”

“Culturally appropriate care means positive experiences so people will seek the service they need.”

“We diagnose and treat diseases but not empower people to manage their own health.”

“We need to define a healthier Nova Scotia and agree before moving forward.”

“We have to pay attention to where health risk factors are created-which is not in health care institutions- they are created by societies.”



Introduction

Nova Scotia is spending more and more money on health care, but the people who live here aren't getting any healthier. In fact, our province is one of the unhealthiest in the country. For this reason, the Nova Scotia Health Authority asked residents to come together to talk about what we need to do to create a healthier future.

From October 2015 to April 2016, we hosted 1,000 people in 42 meetings to figure out how we can be healthier Nova Scotians. During this time, there were 9,000 visits to our *Talk about health* website, and hundreds of people downloaded information, filled out surveys and posted comments.


At our public meetings, we shared information about Nova Scotians' health, then asked people to share their thoughts about opportunities and responsibilities for creating a healthier future. This report summarizes the top themes from those many conversations and the thousands of comments we gathered.

We grouped most of the comments we gathered under these five main themes:


- Cooperate, coordinate, collaborate
- Build supportive systems
- Live well
- Build a healthy society
- Encourage a healthy population

The following ideas crossed over the five themes:

- Nova Scotians value their health system and had many good things to say about it. However, they expect high-quality health care that is easy to access, culturally appropriate and they were honest about the challenges they face when they're sick. Many of them believe the system is too rigid, and that it doesn't focus enough on illness prevention. Some said that poor access to their own health records, as well as to health information generally, challenges them from making the right health decisions.
- Nova Scotians value the positive things that are taking place in their communities to improve their health. They believe volunteering and having strong connections in their communities are important to being healthy.
- Nova Scotians know that improving their health isn't only the responsibility of the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the broader health system and the provincial government. Businesses, non-governmental organizations and other levels of government—as well as communities, families and individuals—also play important roles.



“Government should have a ‘health lens’ in all decision making.”



“Health system needs more funding to prevent illness instead of reacting to illness.”

- Access was a topic that came up often. People talked about access to nutritious food, transportation, employment, education, health services, public facilities, opportunities, social connections and communities.
- Nova Scotians understand the “social determinants of health,” but most of them don’t use that phrase to describe it. Instead, many commented on the different factors that affect their health. Some were frustrated because they feel there’s too much talking about how to fix what’s wrong with the health care system and not enough action, but most understand that we need to take the right amount of time to figure out the best solutions.
- People believe the education system should teach Nova Scotians about health. They said schools are where we should learn about the importance of physical activity, play, recreation, healthy eating and leading healthy and satisfying lives.
- Poverty is a huge issue for Nova Scotians everywhere. People see poverty as the cause of many of the biggest health issues we face. They recognize that addressing poverty is a tough task. They believe governments, non-governmental organizations, communities and businesses need to work more closely on this issue.
- People know that the health of Nova Scotia’s economy has a direct impact on their personal health. Having a good job affects the health choices they can make for themselves and their families. Less money means hard choices about medicine, food, housing and sport and recreation opportunities.
- Nova Scotians commented on how stressful living conditions, cultural issues and discrimination, ageism and racism affect their ability to get a good job and to develop a strong sense of belonging to their community. The stresses of life, the influence of popular culture and social media, some deeply ingrained ideas about Nova Scotia, and a health system that doesn’t focus enough on wellness, have led to a poor “culture of health” in the province.
- The idea that we all need to take a back-to-basics approach to improving health came up often when talking about food and nutrition, health education and promotion, and personal and family health practices. People said that too much health information confuses them. They believe health promotion should create simple tools for them to use that will make it easier for them to be healthy. They want a “show me, don’t tell me” approach to disease prevention and health promotion.

In spite of learning that Nova Scotia is unhealthy and listening to others share their struggles to be healthier, people told us that they were hopeful they could be healthier in the future. They were eager to tell us about how they feel their health could be improved.



Cooperate, coordinate, collaborate

Nova Scotians spoke about the challenges they face dealing with all levels of government, and how their health is affected as a result. They encounter this in the health system and in government departments, organizations and agencies that are related to health.

People had three suggestions where they feel that better cooperation, coordination and collaboration—people working well together—would help improve health:

- Make better use of public infrastructure to encourage healthy people and communities
- Use taxes and subsidies to promote health and healthier choices and to deter unhealthy behaviours and choices
- Coordinate policies, programs and action plans in a number of areas


Many believe making the best use of public infrastructure is important for improving health. Schools were named as a missed opportunity. Nova Scotians told us that outside of regular hours, schools should encourage healthy activities such as sports and recreation, social and physical activities and classes such as gardening, cooking and literacy that are open to the public.

Municipal planning was seen as a way to promote and improve health. Many senior citizens spoke about a growing need for senior-friendly community design. Other people talked about better sidewalks, pedestrian crossings and street lighting as ways of encouraging more walking and biking. Most said municipal governments should support community gardens. In rural areas, protecting farmland could help provide healthier food for Nova Scotians.

People feel that all levels of government can affect people’s health behaviours and choices through taxes and subsidies. For example, if the government helped lower the cost of fresh produce by paying for part of it, more people could afford to buy it.

Most said the provincial government should take a leading role in these areas: healthy food regulation and promoting local food; community economic development; promoting the role of schools and the education system; promoting physical activity and recreation; and addressing poverty, alcohol, housing issues and food security.

Nova Scotians feel the federal government should be more responsible for ensuring safe and healthy food and encouraging local food production. People also said the federal government should be more responsible for improving the health of immigrants and First Nations peoples.



“We need a better understanding on how health dollars are being spent.”



“I need to know the system cares about me as an individual, my needs ... what happens when I leave ... what I am going home to.”

Build supportive systems

Nova Scotians know that health is about more than just hospitals and health care services. It’s clear that Nova Scotians understand the financial challenges facing their health system, yet they still expect it to be accessible, well-run and of high quality.

Accessibility is a top priority. For some, the lack of sign language was seen as an access problem, while others spoke about physical or language barriers. In rural Nova Scotia, people said that activities and services that help improve their health need to be closer to where they live. They would also like some services, such as family doctors and other basic care services to be offered in or near their communities.

Many participants said they have been frustrated and worn out from their experiences trying to navigate the network of health services. Some feel that they haven’t been involved enough in their own care, while others spoke about the problems facing people living in poverty, people of colour, people with disabilities, youth and other marginalized groups.

Nova Scotians see a need for more and better end-of-life care, and they want that care to be well organized and to consider the entire family. They feel these are important issues to allow people to die with dignity, and that those kinds of services can relieve the pressure on hospitals.

Giving people better information increases their understanding about health. Some communities, particularly the African Nova Scotian, said they need information and services that are specific to their culture so they can make better decisions about their health and social issues. Some were frustrated by how often their communities were studied, but information from those studies wasn’t made available to residents or acted upon.

Nova Scotians feel that not everyone can go to college or university because of the high costs. Many also said illiteracy has stopped some people from improving their health and education level and getting better jobs.



Live well

Nova Scotians had a lot to say about what affects their ability to live well. Our *Talk about health* conversations highlighted how modern life can be overwhelming and doesn't always help us live well. People said they understand their own responsibility to look after their health, but messages that "blame and shame" them into taking better care of themselves aren't helpful. We heard that they believe there's a shared responsibility for health, and that we need to change our culture of health before we can change how healthy we are as people and as a province. Many of the comments about living well touched on how poverty limits people's health choices.

Nova Scotians talked about three things they need to help them live well: food, informed personal health choices and coping skills.

People are eager to get information on basic cooking and nutrition and how to make the most of what they can afford to spend on food. They're interested in local food and in learning how community gardens can help them eat better. They believe eating healthfully costs more. They also believe that more and more people are going to food banks.

Participants believe policies created by community organizations, governments and businesses can help us live well. These include regulating the price of healthy food, making clear the difference between healthy and unhealthy food choices, and making food labels easier to understand. People talked about how busy they are and how this leads them to eat cheap fast food. People struggle to eat nutritious food when there are so many convenient, unhealthy and cheap options available.

Personal and family relationships are really important to living well. Participants said that it's important to care for one another and accept people's differences in order to create healthy people and communities. They spoke about how having a positive outlook and feeling good about themselves helps them cope and make better choices.

Nova Scotians told us that poverty, time pressures and busy lives sometimes stop them from eating well, being active, managing stress, getting enough sleep and other good health practices. They understand their responsibility for getting regular health check-ups, and for avoiding risky practices such as those linked to alcohol, drugs, unsafe sex and texting while driving.

“Eradicate judgement – ‘blame the victim’ thinking in schools, hospitals and government.”



Healthy populations

People see a need for greater action to prevent disease because they recognize that prevention is the first—and best—step toward good health.

They want their communities to support them in trying to live healthier lives by being in places that encourage them to be active. They want to work in places that are safe, value a balance between work and home life of staff, and to be able to easily make healthy choices at work.

Nova Scotians want it to be easy to find information about their communities. They believe government should collect and openly share information so residents and community leaders can make the best decisions to help improve people’s health. This includes using race and ethnicity identifiers in data collection.

Nova Scotians understand that good relationships, making use of neighborhood resources and how well people fit into society affect their health. Many worry that some of the things that made communities strong are disappearing. They want more events and activities that encourage people to get together, because spending time with people while doing fun things makes them healthier. They know that healthy communities are caring and respectful places with strong families, friends, neighbours, and spiritual ties.

Certain groups spoke about their specific needs. For example, seniors feel that our idea about aging and older people is out of date. They said today’s seniors are very different from previous generations of older people. They talked about their needs and wondered what’s being done to address them. The health challenges facing single parents and family caregivers were also raised often.

Youth, in particular, said social supports and their own health practices are important. This group said it’s challenging to keep a healthy balance of their mental, physical and emotional needs. They also said that setting realistic goals for these was the key to overall good health, and that the influence of popular culture through social and mass media made this very hard. Even for the smartest and most active involved youth, being accepted by their friends and feeling satisfied and happy was often a daily struggle. They believe schools need to be more welcoming and places where young people can learn about health, social justice, volunteering and leadership.

“The perception that doctors will ‘fix me if I get sick’ undermines our thinking and the need to take charge of our own health. On the flip side, doctors should do more coaching and referring patients to others, even if patients expect a drug to fix them. They have a big responsibility to do what is right, even if it is difficult.”



Build a healthy society

People talked about the benefits of strong, connected and welcoming communities. These kind of communities help lower the levels of poverty and mental illness, as well as the isolation and exclusion felt by some ethnic, cultural and age-related groups like youth and seniors.

Ethnic and cultural groups said they often feel isolated and excluded. African Nova Scotians, immigrants and newcomers, Nova Scotians with disabilities, and Acadian and Francophone Nova Scotians said there must be more understanding of their unique needs. In particular, African Nova Scotians pointed out the unique differences among their communities across the province that need to be respected and valued. Understanding these communities' needs is important to making sure their residents are healthy.

Many from these communities said that it's important to see a wide variety of people represented in the workforce as well as on boards and committees—both in the health system and elsewhere—and that this is critical for ensuring healthy communities. Generally, problems of racism and inequity must be fixed.

A repeated theme in our *Talk about health* conversations with Nova Scotians is the need for greater engagement and involvement. People talked about wanting to be part of making positive changes. One way is through volunteering, which connects them to their community, makes them feel good and helps make both people and communities healthy.

Generally, Nova Scotia needs to ensure that all residents—regardless of their race, language, ability or background—be given opportunities to thrive and take part in their communities. We need stronger partnerships and collaboration with organizations that understand and work with the variety of diverse and minority populations across Nova Scotia.



“Citizens and community organizations have a responsibility to engage, champion and advocate.”



“We need to define a healthier Nova Scotia and agree before moving forward.”

Conclusion

By no means are any of these ideas, opinions, questions or suggestions new—we’ve heard much of this before from Nova Scotians. In our *Talk about health* conversations, there were no “right and wrong” arguments. There was a lot of sharing of experiences, which showed the wide range of issues facing individuals, families and communities.

Our conversations showed us that Nova Scotians are eager to take part in public discussions about our health challenges and to offer their input on how we might start to work together to change the future. It also showed the level of communication, cooperation and collective action we need to determine how to make Nova Scotians healthier.

This report draws no firm conclusions, nor does it contain any recommendations. Instead, it’s a summary of the experiences, challenges and ideas that Nova Scotians shared with us. In fact, our conversations with people raised more questions than they answered! Here are three of them:

- Can we afford to stand back and see what happens if we do nothing and let the conversation end here?
- As individuals, how can we better support our own health, the health of our community and our province?
- How can we move forward from here to create a better culture of health in Nova Scotia?

Nova Scotians generously gave of their time to share their opinions during these conversations, and for that we thank them. They expressed hope that this was a positive first step toward healthier people and a healthier province. Based on the *Talk about health* conversations, we’re committed to sharing these ideas widely and working toward a shared vision of a healthier Nova Scotia.

In the coming weeks you can expect to hear from us again about the next phase of *Talk about health*, and what will be the next steps towards a healthier future of Nova Scotia.

Appendix A: Participation

Talk about health is an opportunity to involve Nova Scotians in discussions about how to create a healthier future. It was launched in October 2015 and concluded in April 2016. There were both public sessions across the province and targeted approaches to reach a diverse range of Nova Scotians. The Community Health Boards contributed significantly by helping connect numerous diverse groups and hosting many of the public sessions.

A wide range of Nova Scotians took part in *Talk about health*. We did not host meetings in every community, nearly half of the 42 meetings were held outside of Halifax. There were over 9000 visitors to our engage4health website, and many joined this discussion online. Many others joined the conversation on Twitter using the hashtag #talkabouthealth.

In spite of these efforts, we were unable to connect with the LGBTQI community and First Nations. We also note that men were not well represented. As we plan the next phase of the strategy we will work to specifically include those we missed.

Talk about health conversations	
Amherst - Cumberland County Community Health Boards and Town of Amherst (Public session)	Dec 2
Antigonish - Municipality of the County of Antigonish (Public session)	Nov 10
Argyle - Reseau Santé (Session held in French)	Jan 22
Bedford - Forsyth Education Centre (Youth session)	Mar 2, 21
Cole Harbour - Southeastern Community Health Board (Community groups)	Jan 26
Dartmouth - Auburn High School (Youth session)	Mar 7,10
Dartmouth - Dartmouth Community Health Board (Public session)	Jan 27
Dartmouth - Health Association of African Canadians	Feb 17
Dartmouth - Housing Help	Mar 3
Dartmouth - Keystone Youth	Mar 2
Dartmouth - MS Peer Support Group	Mar 18
Dartmouth - Reseau Santé (Sessions held in French)	Mar 16
Dartmouth - Torch Youth	Feb 22
Elmsdale - Colchester East Hants Community Health Board (Public session)	Apr 7
Halifax - Caregivers Nova Scotia	Jan 27
Halifax - Chebucto West and Halifax Community Health Boards (Public session)	Dec 1
Halifax - Dalhousie University Health Promotion Students	Mar 16
Halifax - The Society for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians	Apr 4

Appendix A: Participation (continued)

Halifax - Eating Disorders Nova Scotia	Mar 21
Halifax - Health Partners	Feb 3
Halifax - Immigrant Women's Health Network	Mar 31
Halifax - Shannex (Seniors session)	Mar 11
Halifax - Shannex (Seniors session)	Jan 13
Halifax - Shannex (Sister's of Charity)	Mar 22
Greenwood - Kingston Greenwood Community Health Board (Public session)	Nov 17
Kentville - Peopleworx	Feb 26
Kentville - Western Kings Community Health Board (Public session)	Nov 26
Lawrencetown - Annapolis County Family Resource Centre	Feb 23
Liverpool - Municipality of the Region of Queens (Public session)	Nov 5
Middleton - Annapolis County Community Health Board and NSCC Continuing Care Students	Feb 12
Musquodoboit Harbour - Tri Community Council	Feb 4
New Glasgow - Pictou County Community Health Boards (Public session)	Feb 19
New Glasgow - YMCA (Youth session)	Mar 29
Sackville - Cobequid Commuity Health Board (Public session)	Mar 31
Sackville - Millwood High School (Youth session)	Mar 30
Sackville - Sackville High School (Youth session)	Apr 6
Sydney - Sydney Chamber of Commerce	Mar 22
Sydney - Shannex (Seniors session)	Mar 3
Sydney - Reseau Santé (Session held in French)	Mar 13
Truro - Truro Area Community Health Boards (Public session)	Mar 23
Windsor - Community Partners Network	Mar 7
Brooklyn - West Hants Uniacke Community Health Board (Public session)	Mar 29
Yarmouth - Yarmouth County Community Health Board and Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Library (Public session)	Apr 7

Appendix B: Results of participant questionnaire

Total # of responses 900	Strongly agree/Agree	Disagree/Strongly disagree
The purpose of the conversation was clearly explained.	96.21%	2.32%
The supports I needed to participate were available (e.g., travel, child care, etc).	65.55%	2.87%
I had enough information to contribute to the topic being discussed.	91.43%	1.21%
I was able to express my views freely.	96.98%	0.58%
I feel that my views were heard.	95.56%	0.36%
A wide range of views on the topic was expressed.	96.21%	1.16%
I feel that the input provided through this conversation will be considered by the organizers.	89.47%	0.85%
The conversation achieved its stated objectives.	96.21%	0.59%
I understand how the input from this conversation will be used.	73.90%	4.90%
I think this conversation will make a difference.	70.54%	4.43%
As a result of my participation in this conversation, I am better informed about Talk about health.	89.49%	0.86%
As a result of my participation in this conversation, I have greater trust in being part of conversations with Nova Scotia Health Authority.	75.11%	3.30%
Overall, I was satisfied with this conversation.	90.52%	0.58%
This conversation was a good use of my time.	90.89%	1.10%

Join the conversation at engage4health.ca
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