

## Your local health department: It's there for you!

By *Teddi Nicolaus*

Somewhere in your town, county or city, there's a place where people work around the clock to keep you healthy and safe. It's called a local health department. The work that goes on there is called public health, and though you may not always see it, you and your community are safer and healthier because of it.

"Local health departments are on the front lines of public health, working with community partners to ensure the safety of the water we drink, the food we eat and the air we breathe," says Lori Tremmel Freeman, CEO of the National Association of County and City Health Officials, an organization that works to improve the health of communities through local health departments.

People sometimes confuse the work of the health care industry, such as hospitals, with the work of public health, but they differ. Hospitals generally treat people who are unwell, while public health helps people from getting sick or injured in the first place.

Local health departments have a hand in everything from ensuring city planners are creating safe places to walk to making sure housing is safe from hazards like lead paint.

"Public health is all around us," Freeman says. "Often, we don't realize there are things occurring behind the scenes that keep us healthy and safe every day."

The local health department in your community makes it possible for you to drink safe water from your faucets, breathe smoke-free indoor air and swim in public pools without getting sick. Did you eat in a local restaurant recently? If so, you were able to do so without fear of getting food poisoning, thanks to your local health department's inspections. Local health departments find, track and stop outbreaks of diseases, including measles and

tuberculosis, and work with other officials to plan for and respond to emergencies and disasters. Health departments also work with community partners on local public health solutions, such as safe places for kids to play after school and better access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

"You live better — and likely longer — because of the work of local health departments," Freeman says.

### Keeping you safe & healthy

Hoping to kick some unhealthy habits? Kiddos headed back to school and it's time for shots? Need help with family planning and birth control?

Your local health department offers a range of services that can help keep you and your family safe and healthy. Health

departments are a great place to go for blood pressure and diabetes screenings, and staff can link you to health care services if you need them. Other services typically available include adult and childhood immunizations, diet and exercise programs, nutrition education, drug and alcohol abuse counseling, and smoking cessation programs.

They also offer a range of health screenings, such as tests for tuberculosis, blood lead levels, HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.

Many local health departments also offer free or no-cost breast exams, mammograms, Pap and HPV tests, and any needed follow-up testing. Your local health department can also help you access vital records like birth and death certificates.

And whether you're pregnant, a parent or the guardian of a young child, many departments provide services to help your little ones grow up healthy and strong. Programs

>>To find the location of your local health department, visit [bit.ly/myhealthdepartment](https://bit.ly/myhealthdepartment)

such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC, aim to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants and children up to age 5 by providing nutritious foods, information on healthy eating and referrals to health care. In fact, almost 40% of infants born in the U.S. receive WIC benefits, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Having trouble affording that child car seat? Health departments usually offer a free car seat program for low-income families. And they often host free installation events for everyone.

Many local health departments also provide oral health programs, such as fluoride varnish clinics, which prevent tooth decay and improve dental health and overall quality of life for children.

Your local health department might even provide home visits to help you handle the challenges of parenting and learn new skills.

Grammy and Pop Pop can benefit from local health departments too.

Check with your local health department to see if it provides fall prevention programs that focus on physical activity, which can improve balance and reduce the risk of falls as we age.

And let's not forget our four-legged fur babies, who are at risk for diseases like rabies.

Many health departments hold vaccination clinics to help pet owners comply with local laws on rabies vaccinations. Check with your local health department to see what they offer.

