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## Health Educators

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### Significant Points

- 5 out of 10 health educators work in health care and social assistance and an additional 2 out of 10 work in State and local government.
- A bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement for entry level jobs, but many employers prefer to hire workers with a master's degree.
- Rapid job growth is expected, but the relatively small number of jobs in this occupation will limit the number of job openings.

### Nature of the Work

Health educators work to encourage healthy lifestyles and wellness through educating individuals and communities about behaviors that promote healthy living and prevent diseases and other health problems.

They attempt to prevent illnesses by informing and educating individuals and communities about health-related topics, such as proper nutrition, the importance of exercise, how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, and the habits and behaviors necessary to avoid illness. They begin by assessing the needs of their audience, which includes determining which topics to cover and how to best present the information. For example, they may hold programs on self-examinations for breast cancer to women who are at higher risk or may teach classes on the effects of binge drinking to college students. Health educators must take the cultural norms of their audience into account. For example, programs targeted at the elderly need to be drastically different from those aimed at a college-aged population.

After assessing their audiences' needs, health educators must decide how to meet those needs. Health educators have a lot of options in putting together programs to that end. They may organize a lecture, class, demonstration or health screening, or create a video, pamphlet or brochure. Often, planning a program requires working with other people in a team or on a committee within the organization that employs them. Also, health educators must plan programs that are consistent with the goals and objectives of their employers. For example, many nonprofit organizations educate the public about just one disease or health issue and, therefore, limit their programs to cover topics related to that disease or issue.

Next, health educators need to implement their proposed plan. This may require finding funding by applying for grants, writing curriculums for classes, or creating written materials that would be made available to the public. Also, programs may require dealing with basic logistics problems, such as finding speakers or locations for the event.

Generally, after a program is presented, health educators evaluate its success. This could include tracking the absentee rate of employees from work and students from school, surveying participants on their opinions about the program, or other methods of collecting evidence that suggests whether the programs were effective. Through evaluation, they can improve

plans for the future by learning from mistakes and capitalizing on strengths.

Although programming is a large part of their job, health educators also serve as a resource on health topics. This may include locating services, reference material and other resources that may be useful to the community they serve and referring individuals or groups to organizations or medical professionals.

The basic goals and duties of health educators are the same but their jobs vary greatly depending on the type of organization in which they work. Most health educators work in medical care settings, colleges and universities, schools, public health departments, nonprofit organizations, and private business.

Within medical care facilities, health educators tend to work one-on-one with patients and their families. Their goal in this setting is to educate individual patients on their diagnosis and how that may change or affect their lifestyle. Often, this includes explaining the necessary procedures or surgeries as well as how patients will need to change their lifestyles in order to manage their illness or return to full health. This may include directing patients to outside resources that may be useful in their transition, such as support groups, home health agencies or social services. Often, health educators work closely with physicians, nurses, and other staff to create educational programs or materials, such as brochures, Web sites, and classes, for other departments. In some cases, health educators train hospital staff about how to better interact with patients.

Health educators in colleges and universities work primarily with the student population. Generally, they create programs on topics that affect young adults, like sexual activity, smoking, and nutrition. They may need to alter their teaching methods to attract audiences to their events. For example, they might show a popular movie followed by a discussion or hold programs in dormitories or cafeterias. They may teach courses for credit or give lectures on health-related topics. Often they train students as peer educators, who then lead their own programs.

Health educators in schools are typically found in secondary schools, where they generally teach health class. They develop lesson plans that are relevant and age appropriate to their students. They may need to cover sensitive topics, like sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and drugs. They may be required to be able to also teach another subject such as science or physical education. Sometimes they may develop the health education curriculum for the school or the entire school district. (For more information see the statement on secondary school teachers elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Health educators in public health are employed primarily by State and local departments of public health and, therefore, administer State-mandated programs. They often serve as members of statewide councils or national committees on topics like aging. As part of this work, they inform other professionals in changes to health policy. They work closely with nonprofit organizations to help them get the resources they need, such as grants, to continue serving the community.

Health educators in nonprofits strive to get information out to the public on various health problems and make people aware of the resources their programs have to help people to the community. While some organizations target a particular audience, others educate the community regarding one disease or health issue. Therefore, in this setting, health educators may be limited in the topics they cover or the population they serve. Work in



*Health educators teach individuals and groups about topics related to a healthy lifestyle.*

this setting may include creating print-based material for distribution to the community, often in conjunction with organizing lectures, health screenings, and activities related to increasing awareness.

In private industry, health educators create programs to inform the employees of an entire firm or organization. They organize programs that fit into workers' schedules by arranging lunchtime speakers or daylong health screenings so that workers may come when it is most convenient. Educators in this setting must align their work with the overall goals of their employers. For example, a health educator working for a medical supply company may hold a program related to the company's newest product.

**Work environment.** Health educators work in various environments based on the industry in which they work. In public health, nonprofit organizations, business work sites, colleges and universities, and medical care settings they work primarily in offices. However, they may spend a lot of time away from the office implementing and attending programs, meeting with community organizers, speaking with patients, or teaching classes. Health educators in schools spend the majority of their day in classrooms.

Health educators generally work 40 hour weeks. However, when programs, events, or meetings are scheduled they may need to work evening or weekends.

### **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

A bachelor's degree is generally required for entry level health educator positions, but some employers prefer a bachelor's degree and some related experience gained through an internship or volunteer work. A master's degree may be required for some positions and is usually required for advancement. In addition, some employers may require candidates to be Certified Health Education Specialists.

**Education and training.** Entry level health educator positions generally require a bachelor's degree in health education. Over 250 colleges and universities offer bachelor's programs in health education or a similarly titled major. These programs teach students the theories of health education and develop the skills necessary to implement health education programs. Courses in psychology, human development, and a foreign lan-

guage are helpful, and experience gained through an internship or other volunteer opportunities can make graduates more appealing to employers.

Graduate health education programs are often offered under titles such as community health education, school health education, or health promotion and lead to a Master of Arts, Master of Science, Master of Education, or a Master of Public Health degree. Many students pursue their master's in health education after majoring or working in another related field, such as nursing or psychology. A master's degree is required for most health educator positions in public health.

Once hired, on-the-job training for health educators varies greatly depending on the type and size of employer. State and local public health departments and other larger offices may have a formal training program, while smaller health education offices and departments may train new employees through less formal means, such as mentoring or working with more experienced staff. Some employers may require and pay for educators to take continuing education courses to keep their skills up-to-date.

**Other qualifications.** Health educators spend much of their time working with people and must be comfortable working with both individuals and large groups. They need to be good communicators and comfortable speaking in public as they may need to teach classes or give presentations. Health educators often work with a very diverse population so they must be sensitive to cultural differences and open to working with people of varied backgrounds. Health educators often create new programs or materials so they should be creative and skilled writers.

**Certification and advancement.** Health educators may choose to become a Certified Health Education Specialist, a credential offered by the National Commission of Health Education Credentialing, Inc. The certification is awarded after passing an examination on the basic areas of responsibility for a health educator. The exam is aimed at entry level educators who have already completed a degree in health education or are within 3 months of completion. In addition, to maintain certification, health educators must complete 75 hours of approved continuing education courses or seminars over a 5-year period. Some employers prefer to hire applicants who are certified and some States require health educators certification to work in a public health department.

A graduate degree is usually required to advance past an entry level position to jobs such as executive director, supervisor, or senior health educator. These positions may spend more time on planning and evaluating programs than on their implementation, but may require supervising other health educators who implement the programs. Health educators at this level may also work with other administrators of related programs. Some health educators pursue a doctoral degree in health education and may transfer to research positions or become professors of health education (see the statement on postsecondary teachers elsewhere in the *Handbook*)

### **Employment**

Health educators held about 62,000 jobs in 2006. They work primarily in two industries with 20 percent working in State and local government and 53 percent working in health care

## Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-2016	
				Number	Percent
Health educators.....	21-1091	62,000	78,000	16,000	26

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

and social assistance. In addition, a small percent of health educators work in grant-making services and social advocacy organizations.

### Job Outlook

Employment of health educators is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations and job prospects are expected to be favorable.

**Employment change.** Employment of health educators is expected to grow by 26 percent, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. Growth will result from the rising cost of health care and the increased recognition of the need for qualified health educators.

The rising cost of healthcare has increased the need for health educators. As health care costs continue to rise, insurance companies, employers and governments are attempting to find ways to curb the cost. One of the more cost effective ways is to employ health educators to teach people how to live healthy lives and avoid costly treatments for illnesses. Awareness of the number of illnesses, such as lung cancer, HIV, heart disease and skin cancer, that may be avoided with lifestyle changes has increased. These diseases may be avoidable if the public better understands the effects of their behavior on their health. In addition, many illnesses, such as breast and testicular cancer are best treated with early detection so it is important for people to understand how to detect possible problems on their own. The need to provide the public with this information will result in State and local governments, hospitals, and businesses employing a growing number of health educators.

The emphasis on health education has been coupled with a growing demand for qualified health educators. In the past, it was thought that anyone could do the job of a health educator and the duties were often given to nurses or other healthcare professionals. However, in recent years, employers have recognized that those trained specifically in health education are better qualified to perform those duties. Therefore, demand for health professionals with a background specifically in health education has increased.

Demand for health educators will increase in most industries, but their employment may decrease in secondary schools.

Many schools, facing budget cuts, ask teachers trained in other fields, like science or physical education, to teach the subject of health education.

**Job prospects.** Job prospects for health educators with bachelor's degrees will be favorable, but better for those who have acquired experience through internships or volunteer jobs. A graduate degree is preferred by many employers.

### Earnings

Median annual earnings of health educators was \$41,330 in May 2006; the middle 50 percent earned between \$31,300 and \$56,580. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$24,750, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$72,500.

Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of health educators in May 2006 were as follows:

General medical and surgical hospitals.....	\$40,890
State government.....	33,100
Local government .....	32,420
Outpatient care centers.....	27,530
Individual and family services .....	25,760

### Related Occupations

Health educators work closely with people to alter their behavior. Other professions with similar skills include counselors, social workers, psychologists, teachers, social and human service assistances, and nurses.

### Sources of Additional Information

For further information about health educators, contact:

➤ American Association for Health Education, 1900 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191

Internet: <http://www.aahperd.org/aahe/>

For information on voluntary credentialing and job opportunities, contact:

➤ The National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc. 1541 Alta Drive, Suite 303, Whitehall, PA 18052-5642 Internet: <http://www.nchec.org>