70 Years of Public Health
1948–2018
Tri-County Health Department’s official history starts in 1948, but the story begins long before then...

1858–90 The Colorado gold rush brings over 100,000 people to Colorado in search of riches, but most only find hardships such as mining injuries, typhoid fever, venereal disease, alcohol, drugs and violence.

Physicians’ concerns about unsanitary conditions result in Colorado’s first medical societies, eventually leading to modern health departments. See 1944

1892–1954 Over twelve million immigrants enter the U.S. through Ellis Island, next to the Statue of Liberty. If the immigrant’s papers were in order and they were in reasonably good health, the inspection process would last approximately 3 to 5 hours.

Only two percent were rejected, for reasons such as having a contagious disease that would endanger the public’s health, a criminal background, insanity, or if the immigrant was likely to become an illegal contract laborer. The new arrivals were expected to be able to support themselves, so the government wanted the immigrants to have between $18 and $25. See 1954

1918 An influenza pandemic kills 600,000 Americans and 50 to 100 million people worldwide. Most are young adults with robust immune systems, instead of infants and the elderly. See 1945, 2009

1900s–1950s Colorado’s sunshine and clean mountain air help establish the state as a haven for people suffering from tuberculosis. By the 1920s, nearly 60% of the state’s residents are here as a result of TB treatment facilities.

Colorado gains a reputation as a health-oriented state. Tourism promotes Colorado as the perfect place for TB sufferers. See 1946

The Great Depression and two world wars have a huge impact on Americans’ health and nutrition. Many people are dependent on charities for food and health care.

1940s Though discovered in 1928, the very first antibiotic, penicillin, is not commercially developed until the 1940s and first used extensively in World War II, saving thousands of lives. Pneumonia, syphilis, gonorrhea, diphtheria, scarlet fever and many other infections that once killed indiscriminately suddenly become treatable.

It is one of the most important medical discoveries of all time. Infectious diseases plummet as major causes of death worldwide. See 1980

1940s WWII military physicals reveal that many Americans are in poor physical health and suffer from inadequate nutrition. Twenty percent of the men are rejected because they cannot meet the minimum dental requirement of six pairs of opposing teeth. For much of the population, toothbrushing becomes a daily habit only after military men return to civilian life.

1940s The wartime rationing of gas, meat, sugar, coffee, butter and cheese is not popular, but “Victory Gardens” help to ease food shortages and improve nutrition as Americans produce at least one-third of all the fresh vegetables consumed.

1944 Prepaid group health insurance created.

1944 Sunscreen invented.

1944 While in her late seventies, world-renowned scientist and Colorado native Florence Sabin chairs a statewide health committee, campaigning against sub-standard restaurant and hospital sanitation, contaminated milk, rat infestations, and high rates of tuberculosis and syphilis.

She helps modernize Colorado’s public health system, and lays the foundation for the creation of Tri-County Health Department, as well as all public health activities to this day. Dr. Sabin is the guest speaker at TCHD’s Board of Health meeting in July 1948.

1945 First vaccine for influenza. See 2009

1946 Streptomycin becomes the first effective treatment for TB.

1946 The Communicable Disease Center, which will become the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is established to prevent malaria from spreading across the nation. See 1951
Tri-County District Health Department opens on January 1, 1948, in the basement of the psychopathic ward of Colorado University Medical School.

In 1948, Tri-County first served the 150,000 residents of Adams, Arapahoe and Jefferson Counties, with a per capita county contribution of 52¢ per person and a total budget of $65,070.

Agency concerns include tuberculosis, venereal disease, school nurses, crippled children, maternal and child health, milk from dairy farms, contaminated water supplies, sewage disposal, trash dumps, latrines, and educational lectures for the public.

Vaccinations eliminated smallpox in the U.S., but parents still feared polio, which at its peak in the 1940s and 1950s would paralyze or kill over half a million people worldwide every year.

From this humble beginning, Tri-County Health Department (TCHD) has grown to now serve 1.5 million people in Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties, offering over 60 programs, with 11 offices in a 3,000 square mile region. Just look how far we’ve come....
1951 Civil defense drills: preparedness against Russian nuclear missiles.

1952 Shell Oil begins producing pesticides and chemicals at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, a former military facility in Adams County that manufactured nerve gas. Disposal practices lead to contamination of soil, structures and groundwater. See 1987

1952 McDonald’s franchises open, selling 100 million hamburgers by 1958.

1953 TV dinners are invented. They are convenient and futuristic, but not very nutritious.

1953 Saran Wrap plastic germ barrier film invented.

1954 Ellis Island closes after 62 years. 12 million people—about 70% of all U.S. immigrants—passed through the health screening process.

1954 Disposable syringe and needle are invented, replacing needles and glass syringes that had to be sterilized after each use. See 1955, 2016

1955 Salk polio vaccine is invented. Polio had caused 15,000 cases of paralysis each year in the U.S. TCHD was part of the Polio Foundation field trials, which involved 1.8 million U.S. schoolchildren—the largest clinical trial in U.S. history. By 1957, TCHD had given 100,000 polio shots… with the newly-invented single-use disposable syringes.

1956 New Colorado sanitation regulations require a kitchen sink, indoor toilet, and tub or shower in all homes.

1956 Fluoride toothpaste is invented.

1957 TCHD conducts Colorado’s first air pollution survey, which includes industrial plants and backyard incinerators.

1958 Jefferson County separates from TCHD to start its own local health department.

1960 The oral contraceptive pill gives women a safe, discreet way to control their fertility, improving their social and economic situation without fear of an unexpected pregnancy. Women get out of the kitchen and into the workplace in unprecedented numbers, and convenience foods and fast food restaurants proliferate.

1960 TCHD opens children’s dental clinics, charging $0.40 a visit, and our home nursing service charges $4.00 a visit.

1960 The Framingham Study links the “risk factors” of high cholesterol, high blood pressure, cigarette smoking, and obesity to heart disease—which doctors previously thought was simply a consequence of aging.

1961 Sabin oral polio vaccine is invented.

1962 TCHD opens family planning clinics, which help prevent unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

1962 Silent Spring, by zoologist Rachel Carson, is widely credited as the turning point in the environmental movement, inspiring widespread concerns about pollution, pesticides, and chemicals, helping facilitate the banning of DDT in 1972.

1962 Mumps vaccine is invented. Prior to this, up to 4 million people had measles annually in the U.S. 48,000 were hospitalized, and 400–500 died. U.S. cases plummet by 99%; however, an estimated 20 million measles cases still occur globally every year.

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1964 Surgeon General’s landmark report on smoking eventually leads to anti-smoking campaigns and health warnings on cigarette packages. U.S. smoking rates drop from 42% in 1964 to 15.5% in 2018, saving an estimated 8 million lives.

1965 Disposable latex gloves invented.

1965 The South Platte River floods on June 15, devastating the metro area. Drinking water has to be boiled to prevent water-borne diseases. TCHD responds with disease control, disposal of dead animals, tetanus shots, and the control of insects, rodents and snakes.

1965 Recognizing the lifesaving disaster aid that they received after the flood, Douglas County joins Tri-County District Health Department. See 1985

1966 Seatbelts are required in all new cars. Seatbelts have saved over 300,000 lives to date.

1966 Frozen fast food French fry is invented. Fried potatoes—primarily fries and potato chips—are the most commonly consumed vegetable by children in the U.S.

1967 Nationwide 911 phone system is established.

1967 Mumps vaccine is invented. U.S. cases drop 99.8% from an all-time high of 212,000 cases a year.
1968 National birth certificate standards are revised to report more public health data on maternal and child health.

1969 Home smoke detector invented.

1970 The first Earth Day becomes a turning point in recognition of the importance of environmental health, air and water cleanup, and preservation of nature.

1970 The Environmental Protection Agency, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration are all established.

1971 Cigarette advertising banned on TV and radio.

1971 Combined measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine (MMR) developed.

1972 DDT pesticide is banned in the U.S.

1972 Consumer Product Safety Commission is established.

1972 Norovirus is first identified. It is the #1 cause of illness that TCHD currently investigates.

1972 The 40-year Tuskegee syphilis study is exposed, resulting in better informed consent laws and legal rights of participants.

1973 Auto lead emissions are discovered to be a public health threat.

1974 FDA requires food labeling of all ingredients.

1974 Chicken pox vaccine is invented. The incidence has fallen about 90% from a yearly average of 4 million cases in the U.S.

1974 WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children is established. WIC results in better health and dramatic savings in medical care costs. In 1974, Tri-County WIC served 668 clients— currently over 21,000—the largest WIC program in Colorado.

1974 The Safe Drinking Water Act sets national drinking water standards.

1974 Car airbag is invented; and mandatory on new cars in 1991.

1975 TCHD begins dental services for Arapahoe County seniors.

1975 Bicycle safety helmet is invented.

1976 Ebola virus is discovered.

1976 Legionnaires’ Disease is discovered.

1978 Lead levels in paint are regulated to reduce lead poisoning in children.

1978 Asbestos is restricted from household use and products.

1978 Chlorofluorocarbon propellants (CFCs) are banned to protect the ozone layer. See 1985

1978 The last outbreak of polio in the U.S. Many people had to live in an “Iron Lung” to help them breathe, before the invention of respirators.

1979 Smallpox is fully-eradicated worldwide. Hundreds of millions of people contracted smallpox, and an estimated 300 million people died from it in the 20th century alone. In the last 40 years, the vaccination has prevented at least 40 million deaths. It changed the course of human history and is often heralded as the single greatest achievement of public health.

1980 Soft Soap, liquid hand soap with a pump dispenser is invented.

1980 FDA establishes Infant Formula standards.

1981 The first U.S. cases of what will later be called acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) are reported.

1981 MRSA, multi drug-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, first appears in the U.S. MRSA is often referred to as a “superbug.”

1982 Seven people die from cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules in Chicago. The unsolved crime leads to federal anti-tampering laws and safety seals on consumer packages.

1982 Proper use of child car seats is shown to reduce deaths by 90%.

1984 Discovery of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. By 1989, 100,000 U.S. cases had been reported.

1984 Movie star Rock Hudson dies of AIDS. His death brings global attention to the disease.

1984 TCHD offered a Homecoming Program for new mothers and babies. Visiting at 24 and 72 hours after discharge at a cost of $60 for both home visits.

1984 TCHD starts a traveling Wellness Wagon, providing health appraisal, blood pressure and cholesterol screening, health counseling and referrals. Cost is $10 a person.

1985 Revised agency name and a new logo. See 2008

1985 A hole in the ozone layer is discovered, leading to concerns of global warming and climate change.
1986 Bald eagles are discovered at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. An endangered species at the time, they became the catalyst for making the Arsenal a wildlife refuge. See 2004

1987 The Rocky Mountain Arsenal is designated a Superfund site for cleanup of toxic materials. TCHD samples and maps area residents' contaminated drinking water wells.

1987 Princess Diana becomes one of the first public figures to be photographed touching a person with AIDS without wearing protective gloves, gown and face mask. Her simple gesture of shaking hands and giving hugs has a global impact on the attitude toward people with AIDS.

1987 TCHD starts an AIDS community education program, helping schools develop their AIDS policy, and leading public forums.

1988 “Understanding AIDS” is mailed to every household in the U.S., the first time the federal government attempted to contact virtually every U.S. resident by mail regarding a major public health concern.

1988 The Joe Camel mascot first appears, with allegations that the cartoon character appeals to children as future smokers. In 1997, R.J. Reynolds voluntarily ends the campaign. See vaping 2012

1988 The Surgeon General declares nicotine as addictive as heroin.

1988 Purell hand sanitizer is invented, but proper handwashing still remains the most effective disease control procedure.

1989 TCHD Dietetic Internship program begins, providing nutrition graduates with wide-ranging community and public health experiences, and qualifying them to take the Registered Dietitian exam, with 143 graduates to date.

1990 Smoking is banned on domestic U.S. flights.

1990 Nicotine patch to quit smoking invented.

1991 Red ribbons that symbolize AIDS awareness and compassion first appear, at Broadway’s Tony Awards broadcast. Pink for breast cancer soon appears, as do others.

1991 First breast pump for non-hospital use. See 2008

1991 The last case of polio in the Western hemisphere is reported.


1992 TCHD begins children’s immunization clinics in neighborhood locations such as churches, rec centers and fire stations.

1992 The USDA Food Pyramid replaces the four food groups—grains, meats, dairy, and fruits and vegetables.

1993 Four deaths and 600 illnesses are traced to E. coli O157:H7 bacteria in undercooked hamburgers. Subsequently, meat-handling procedures are improved nationwide including standards for proper temperatures to kill food-borne bacteria.

1993 375,000 people converge at Cherry Creek Reservoir to see Pope John Paul II at a World Youth Day celebration. TCHD facilitates a massive public health effort to supply drinking water, inspect food vendors, supervise portable bathroom facilities, and prevent the spread of disease.

1993 FMLA, the Family and Medical Leave Act, allows for unpaid leave due to a serious health condition, to care for a sick family member, or to care for a new baby.

1993 FDLA Nutrition Fact labels are revised to reflect percentages of fat, salt, sugar, calories, vitamins, and minerals.

1994 Known in history as far back as ancient Egypt, polio is declared eliminated from the Western Hemisphere.

1994 TCHD launches Mothers First, a support program for pregnant and parenting women at high risk.

1995 The CDC announces that AIDS has become the #1 cause of death for Americans between ages 25 and 44.

1996 Hepatitis A vaccine is invented.

1998 The $206 billion 25-year Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement settles Medicaid lawsuits between tobacco companies and 46 states, including Colorado. The companies agree to restrict their advertising, sponsorship, lobbying and litigation activities; and not promote youth smoking. The settlement initially funds TCHD’s tobacco prevention and cessation program as well as the statewide QuitLine. See 2001 and 2002


1999 Y2K concerns inspire emergency preparedness plans, and home stockpiles of food, water and supplies in the event of an emergency.

2000 Colorado legalizes medical marijuana.
2000 Smoking is banned on all international flights to and from the U.S.

2001 TCHD Tobacco Prevention and Cessation program begins.


2002 TCHD’s Office of Emergency Preparedness is established.

2003 FluMist needle-free nasal-mist influenza vaccine is invented.

2004 The 15,000 acre Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge is established, currently attracting 450,000 visitors a year.

2005 Hurricane Katrina creates the largest public health disaster the U.S. has ever seen, with 1,800 deaths and $25 billion in damage. TCHD helps with intake of 3,600 evacuees, providing immunizations and WIC services.

2006 Colorado bans smoking in restaurants, bars and most other indoor public places. Smoking still remains the #1 preventable cause of death in the U.S.

2010 TCHD receives a $10.5M national grant for obesity prevention—distributing funds to community partners and all of our 15 school districts—to support healthy food choices, and to fund walking trails, playgrounds and community gardens.

2011 TCHD’s Emergency Preparedness and Response program becomes nationally-certified for public health emergencies.

2012 TCHD begins community Workplace Wellness services, currently reaching 65 employers and 80,000 employees.

2012 “Vaping” e-cigarettes becomes popular as major tobacco companies invest billions of dollars in products, with bubble gum-, candy- and fruity-flavors that appeal to youth. 3.6 million U.S. school students currently use e-Cigarettes.

2014 TCHD starts working with municipalities and organizations to expand “No Smoking” areas to “No Vaping” areas.

2014 Colorado becomes the first state to legally sell recreational marijuana.

2014 TCHD joins the Metro Healthy Beverage Partnership to decrease consumption of sugary drinks.

2015 TCHD creates resources explaining marijuana’s effects during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

2016 TCHD leads a partnership of public health agencies, community mental health centers, health care providers, hospitals and others to develop the “Let’s Talk Colorado” campaign to help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.

2016 TCHD launches the Aurora Syringe Access Program, to reduce the sharing of used needles, and prevent the spread of HIV and hepatitis C.

2016 TCHD facilitates the Tri-County Overdose Prevention Partnership, to promote safe disposal, public awareness, education and treatment.

2017 Drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death for adults under 55. With more than 70,000 deaths, it ranks higher than deaths from HIV, car crashes, or gun violence at their peaks, resulting in decreased overall U.S. life expectancy.

2017 TCHD earns national public health accreditation, by meeting rigorous national standards and delivering outstanding service.

2018 UN Secretary General declares Climate Change “The greatest threat to human health in history.” Public health concerns include global warming, floods, drought, diminishing food production, increased animal- and insect-borne diseases, as well as poverty, malnutrition, displacement and mass migration.

2018 Colorado’s kindergartners rank last of all states in vaccine coverage for measles, mumps, whooping cough and chickenpox—attributed to the most lenient personal exemption policies in the country.

2019 TCHD is the largest local health department in Colorado, serving over 1.5 million residents of Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties with more than 60 programs and services.
We want you to live a long and healthy life! The CDC states that hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars have been saved by public health prevention and care, including improvements in vaccine-preventable diseases, prevention and control of infectious diseases, tobacco control, maternal and infant health, motor vehicle safety, cardiovascular disease prevention, occupational safety, cancer prevention, childhood lead poisoning prevention, and improved emergency preparedness and response. American life expectancy is at 78.6 years, and 25 of the 30 years gained in the past 100 years are directly attributable to public health advances, not medical miracles.

Vaccinating every child born in the United States in a given year with the current recommended childhood immunization schedule could prevent approximately 42,000 deaths and 20 million cases of disease, resulting in a savings of $20 billion in healthcare costs over the lifetime of those children.

In 2018, TCHD administered 23,488 vaccinations.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) was established in 1974. WIC contributes to improved pregnancies, healthier children, and reduced medical costs by providing nutritious foods, information on healthy eating, and breastfeeding promotion and support.


Heart disease and stroke are still among the nation’s leading killers. However, deaths from both diseases have declined, mainly due to lower smoking rates as well as improvements in treatment, medications and quality of care, all of which have led to reductions in risk factors such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. However, U.S. obesity rates have grown from approximately 10% in 1948 to 40% in 2018.

Improvements in technology have made it easier to identify the source of a foodborne illness, and help control the spread of an outbreak.

In 2018, TCHD investigated 90 disease outbreaks in Child Care Centers, Long-Term Care Facilities, and Restaurants; inspected 9,564 foodservice establishments; and sent 36 Health Alerts to 5,174 Emergency Preparedness and Response partners.

The 1964 Surgeon General’s report on smoking led to anti-smoking campaigns, a ban on advertising, and a drop in smoking rates from 42% to 15.5%.

In 2018, cigarettes are still responsible for more than 480,000 U.S. deaths per year, including over 41,000 deaths from secondhand smoke. Plus, more than 16 million Americans are living with a disease caused by smoking.

**1948 Annual Report:**

Ten staff nurses gave the following services during visits to homes, schools and offices:

- Tuberculosis: 1,630
- Venereal disease: 80
- Childhood communicable disease: 430
- Sick people visits: 1,093
- Maternity visits: 657
- Infant and preschool hygiene: 2,726
- Dental services: 676
- Tonsil and adenoid operations: 145
- Referrals to child welfare: 30

Immunizations administered:

- Smallpox: 2,553
- Whooping cough: 2,251
- Diphtheria: 2,797
- Tetanus: 2,512

**1948 Cost of Living:**

- Average income: $2,936/year
- Minimum wage: 40¢/hour
- New house: $7,700
- New car: $1,230
- Average rent: $70/month
- Tuition to Harvard: $525/year
- Movie ticket: 60¢
- Gasoline: 16¢/gallon
- Postage stamp: 3¢
- Milk: 87¢/gallon
- Ground coffee: 60¢/pound
- Eggs: 23¢/dozen
- Fresh ground hamburger: 45¢/pound
- Fresh baked bread: 14¢/loaf

**1950 Census:**

- Adams County: 40,234
- Arapahoe County: 52,125
- Jefferson County: 55,687
- Three-County Total: 148,046
- State of Colorado: 1,325,089
- United States: 151,325,798

**Yearly Salaries, 1953:**

- Clerk: $2,160
- Nurse: $3,000
- Nurse Supervisor: $4,200
- Sanitarian Level I: $3,000
- Sanitarian Level IV: $5,400
- Executive Director: $10,000
- County Contribution: $52¢/person


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Tri-County Health Department values and welcomes people of all ages; ethnicities; genders and gender identities/expressions; sexual orientations; languages spoken; nationalities and cultures; physical, mental and developmental abilities; races; religions; and socio-economic, insurance and immigration status.