



GOALS OF A HEALTH RISK ASSESSMENT

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Goals of a Health Risk Assessment

Risk factors -- like lifestyle, family history and previous illnesses -- make one person more likely to contract a disease than another. People who know that they are at risk of developing certain conditions can take steps to prevent or at least delay them. A health risk assessment is a screening tool that allows individuals to learn more about what health conditions they may be at risk for and what steps they can take to minimize that risk. The tool also provides data. This white paper will provide an overview of health risk assessments and explain the goals of such assessments for patients and industry representatives.

HRA Background

A health risk assessment, called an HRA for short, is a self-administered survey or questionnaire that individuals take to learn more about their overall health and health risks. First developed in the 1970s, when doctors used them in conjunction with treatment, HRAs are now widely available and are used to encourage the general public to seek appropriate healthcare. Although some HRAs may still be administered by doctors, most are now provided through other types of organizations as health promotion tools. For example, nonprofit organizations and health care companies often use health risk assessments to encourage the public to be more aware of their health situation and potential risks.

HRA Format

In the past, HRAs were primarily offered in paper hard copy in a format that looked similar to a high school exam. Individuals would fill in bubbles or circle responses and then calculate their scores based on the instructions included with the exam.

Today, the majority of HRAs are free and online, which means that people can take them at any time. Because they are online, scoring is now typically done automatically, and people can obtain instant access to the report that provides and explains their scores.

Each HRA's questions are slightly different depending on their purpose, but most include questions relating to medical history, lifestyle, health statistics -- like blood pressure -- and attitude toward health. After completing the HRA, individuals are provided with a summary of what their answers say about their overall health and risk for certain disorders. Some HRAs may provide this information in the form of a consultation with a medical professional, while others may simply offer a report.

Typically, HRAs include a score that indicates a patient's risk for certain health conditions. Because most HRAs are now available online, an instant report containing an individual's score and explanation of that score is most common. The virtual nature of the report makes it easier for patients to save or print the report and bring it for discussion with their healthcare professionals at a later date.

HRA Goals

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the following industries use HRAs, primarily in conjunction with healthcare promotion programs: healthcare, education, business, and industrial. Offering health risk assessments encourage individuals to participate in preventative or risk-reducing programs. When they see their risk of negative health conditions, individuals are more likely to seek necessary healthcare. For this reason, HRAs have three distinct goals:

- The first and most obvious goal is to provide an individual with an assessment of health and risk factors.
- The second goal is to encourage the patient to seek healthcare based on the information in the report.
- The third and final goal is to provide vital data and statistics about health risks in the community to people other than the patient.

Goal: Assess a Person's Health and Detail Risk Factors

One of the most important goals of an HRA screening tool is to provide an overview of a person's health and detail health risk factors. Most HRAs are fairly comprehensive, meaning that they are developed to screen patients for a variety of conditions or risks. However, some HRAs may be focused on just a few specific health risks. Regardless, all HRAs seek to offer information to the patient about his or her current health status.

Typically, this information is communicated in a report that is generated with the HRA results. Most HRAs will provide detailed information that explains which health conditions a patient is at risk for. The HRA report will likely also explain why the person is at risk and how great the risk is. Often, the HRA report comes complete with a number or score on a scale that communicates a person's risk for a specific condition.

Most HRAs are designed to provide information that is as accurate as possible and that will identify health risks as early as possible. Reports are often written in informative, easy-to-understand language in order to inform but not frighten the patient. Otherwise, the results of the HRA might discourage rather than encourage the individual from obtaining the appropriate healthcare.

Goal: Promote Healthcare

Although informing the patient about his or her health risk factors is an important goal of HRAs, these assessments are also usually designed in order to promote healthcare practices that will help patients lower their risk of contracting a disease or condition. In fact, one of the most important goals of the screening tool is to encourage patients to take necessary health measures, like engaging in preventative care, by showing them that the costs of not doing so may be high.

Accompanying the overall assessment and risk factor information on the patient report is typically information about what steps the patient can take to prevent the diseases or conditions that he or she is at greatest risk of contracting. These recommendations may include starting a diet and exercise plan, visiting a doctor to discuss therapy options or refraining from certain activities or substances, like sexual activity or alcohol.

Although an HRA report can provide some specific information about what an individual should or should not do to decrease his or her risk of contracting diseases, most assessments encourage patients to see a doctor to talk about their risks and develop a treatment or prevention plan.

Goal: Learn Vital Statistics

While patients certainly benefit from taking and receiving the results of an HRA, industry representatives also depend on the data they gather from these screening tools. For example, healthcare program administrators use the results from HRAs to determine which prevention programs to run and calculate how many people are likely to participate in that program.

For example, if an HRA showed that more than half of the people who took the assessment were at risk for lung cancer, a healthcare provider would likely decide to hold a lung cancer prevention seminar and might expect that a large percentage of those who took the HRA would attend. Healthcare professionals may also use data obtained through HRAs to determine whether they should run a campaign to raise awareness about a certain disease.

In addition to healthcare professionals, employers often use the vital statistics obtained through HRAs to make decisions about their workplaces. HRAs can help employers forecast what kind of a toll poor health might take on their employee base. Employers who analyze data gathered from HRAs that are distributed in their workplaces can predict whether absences due to illness, long-term sick leave, or even deaths from health-related concerns are likely to affect their workplaces and costs in the future. In other words, one goal of an HRA for employers is to determine the overall health of their workforce and what effect it might have on their businesses.

Employers who find that their workers are overwhelmingly unhealthy may be encouraged to consider how the work environment may be contributing to employees' poor health and how employers can change that work environment to promote healthier lifestyles. For example, many employers provide wellness or prevention programs for their employees. By analyzing the data from HRAs, employers can determine what kind of programs would be best to offer. Furthermore, employers who realized that a large percentage of their employees were at risk of developing diabetes because of weight issues might encourage normally sedentary employees to move around more by putting a gym in the building or encouraging employees to take breaks in which they take short walks.

Summary and Conclusion

A health risk assessment (HRA) is a type of screening tool designed to provide an overall picture of a patient's health and the conditions for which he or she might be at risk. The goals of a health risk assessment include offering patients a detailed explanation of their health status and risks and promoting appropriate healthcare measures. Another goal of an HRA is to provide aggregate data about community health risks to individuals other than patients, such as healthcare program administrators and employers. The data should be that which is useful for program planning and understanding the effects of these risks. HRAs have proven to be useful tools, not only for individuals who may be unaware of their risks, but also for professionals who need to know how communities can prevent risk and how health risk affect an organization's bottom line.

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