

Improving oral health

Local government action guide

Oral health is important for overall health and wellbeing. Poor oral health can cause pain, affect quality of life and has been associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, oral cancers and obesity. Yet common oral diseases are largely preventable and share modifiable risk factors (such as tobacco use and an unhealthy diet high in free sugars) common to other chronic diseases.

Oral disease is a key marker of disadvantage. Communities that are disproportionately affected by poor oral health include people on low incomes, dependent older people, homeless people, some Aboriginal people, people in rural areas, people with a disability and people from culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly refugees.

Councils can make an impact on their residents' oral health by helping to create environments that promote oral health. This guide outlines a range of evidence-informed actions that councils can consider when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans or Council Plans, Municipal Early Years Plans and other strategies.

Why promote oral health?

Tooth decay

Tooth decay is the most prevalent disease in Victoria



Dental conditions are the highest cause of all potentially preventable hospitalisations in children 0-9 years predominantly because of tooth decay

Key causative factors for tooth decay



Sugar in foods and drinks

Broader social determinants of health



Lack of access to preventive effects from fluoride such as in toothpaste and water

Almost half of all children aged 5-10 years have signs of tooth decay. About 37 per cent of tooth decay in high-risk preschoolers is in early stages, that is preventable. More than 90 per cent of adults are also affected by tooth decay, with one in three experiencing untreated tooth decay.

Gum disease



Gum disease is the fifth most common health problem in adults

Key causative factors for gum disease



Plaque on the gum margins of teeth

Smoking and diabetes

Broader social determinants of health

Oral cancer



14 oral cancer cases diagnosed each week on average and more than 200 Victorians die each year

Key causative factors for oral cancer



Lifestyle exposures such as tobacco, alcohol and human papillomavirus (HPV) infection

A total of \$3.1 billion was spent in Victoria on dental treatment in 2017-18. Individuals were responsible for 70 per cent of the total cost of dental care.

The proposed actions are consistent with the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (VPHP) 2019-2023*, that identifies four focus areas for the next four years including:

- *Increasing healthy eating:* Poor diet and consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks are important contributors to poor oral health, highlighting a significant co-benefit of action to increase healthy eating.
- *Reducing tobacco-related harm:* Smoking increases the risk of gum disease and oral cancer.

Opportunities for councils to improve oral health

Identify community oral health needs

- Access Local Government Area oral health profiles which contain population oral health information for your local area, for example self-reported oral health status, rates of smoking, fruit and vegetable intake and soft drink consumption. [LGA oral health profiles](#)

Create healthy environments

- Improve access to drinking water in public places through the installation of drinking water fountains. [VicHealth LGA action guide](#)
- Create additional smoke-free areas in public spaces which are not covered by state legislation.
- Encourage councils, local workplaces, health services, sport and recreation centres, parks and other public settings to increase access to healthy food and drinks through their retail outlets, vending machines and catering. [Healthy Choices guidelines](#)
- Encourage these public settings to contact the Healthy Eating Advisory Service (HEAS) for information and advice about providing healthy food and drinks. [Healthy Eating Advisory Service \(HEAS\)](#)
- Encourage sporting clubs to participate in the Good Sports Program to prevent alcohol harm, smoking and promote healthy eating. [Good Sports Program](#)
- Councils can register with the Achievement Program as a health promoting workplace and choose the healthy eating and oral health, and smoking priorities. [The Achievement Program](#)
- Use and promote the Rethink sugary drink campaign resources. [Rethink Sugary Drink Campaign](#)

Support oral health promotion in children's settings

- Support Maternal & Child Health Nurse services to work with dental providers to develop referral pathways for children with identified dental needs.
- Support and encourage participation of early childhood services and schools in the Achievement Program, particularly with achievement of the healthy eating and oral health benchmarks. [The Achievement Program](#)

- Implement programs and approaches to support healthy eating across the lifespan, particularly in children's early years. For example, the INFANT program and MCH resources. [INFANT MCH healthy eating resources](#)
- Encourage schools to participate in the Smile Squad – School Dental Program. [Smile Squad - School Dental Program](#)
- Encourage early childhood services and schools to adopt healthy eating policies. Services may engage HEAS for information and advice on menu planning and assessment or use the FoodChecker tool. [Healthy Eating Advisory Service \(HEAS\)](#)
- Access information about oral health promotion resources and programs including Smiles 4 Miles and Healthy Families Healthy Smiles. [Health Promotion Programs Primary and secondary school resources](#)

Promote oral health in aged, disability, youth and refugee and Aboriginal programs

- Integrate oral health promotion into existing healthy eating initiatives.
- Include oral health promotion in the assessment and care plans of Home And Community Care (HACC) clients [HACC Program for Younger People assessment](#)
- Include an oral health promotion focus in youth and refugee programs.
- Reduce recreation related oral injuries by promoting the use of mouth guards for contact sports.

Build capacity for oral health promotion in council programs

- Promote oral health by celebrating events such as Dental Health Week and World Oral Health Day. [Dental Health Week](#) and [World Oral Health Day](#)
Provide training and resources to enable staff working in relevant programs to deliver evidence based oral health promotion. [Evidence Based Oral Health Promotion Resource](#)