

Improving oral health

Local government action guide



Oral health is integral to overall health and well-being. Poor oral health can cause pain, affect quality of life and has been associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes and adverse pregnancy outcomes. Most oral diseases are largely preventable and associated with modifiable risk factors (such as tobacco use, alcohol consumption and excess sugar intake) common to other chronic diseases.



Oral disease is a key marker of disadvantage. Communities that are particularly impacted by poor oral health include people on low incomes, dependent older people, people at risk of homelessness, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people living in rural and regional areas, people with a disability and people from culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly refugees and asylum seekers.



Councils can make an impact by creating environments that promote oral health and prevent oral diseases among their communities. 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.



40% of all children aged 5-10 years have signs of tooth decay



37% of tooth decay in high-risk preschoolers is in early stages, and is preventable



>90% of adults are also affected by tooth decay, with one in three experiencing untreated tooth decay

Key risk factors for tooth decay:

1

Sugary foods and drinks

2

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

3

Broader social determinants of health

> Gum disease

Gum disease is the

5th

most common health problem in adults



Key risk factors for gum disease:

- Plaque and calculus on the gum margins of teeth
- Smoking, vaping and diabetes

> Oral cancer



On average **16** oral cancer cases are diagnosed each week and more than **150** Victorians die each year

Key risk factors for oral cancer

- Lifestyle exposures such as tobacco
- Vaping
- Alcohol
- Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection

The proposed actions are consistent with the [Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-27](#), which identifies ten priority areas including:

- Increasing healthy eating: High consumption of sugars is the main cause of tooth decay. Tooth decay can be prevented by reducing intake of sugary food and drinks.
- Reducing harm from tobacco and e-cigarette use: Smoking increases the risk of severe gum disease and oral cancer.
- Reducing alcohol and drug use: Alcohol consumption is harmful for oral health. Oral cancer is six times more common in alcohol drinkers than in non-drinkers.

The proposed actions are also consistent with the [Victorian Action Plan to Prevent Oral Disease 2020-30](#), which identifies four priority areas: improve oral health of children; promote healthy environments; improve oral health literacy; Improve oral health promotion, screening, early detection and prevention services.

Opportunities for council to improve oral health

> Identify community oral health needs

Access [LGA oral health profiles](#) which contain population oral health information for your local area, for example decay experience among children attending public dental services, self-reported oral health status, and other indicators.

> Create healthy environments

- Include oral health as a priority in your Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan.
- Advocate for water fluoridation for your community and learn about the strategies Gannawarra Shire used to successfully do this in this [case study](#). You can find out if your local communities have fluoridated water by using the [search tool](#).
- Promote tap water as the preferred drink of choice
- Improve access to drinking water in public places through the installation of drinking water fountains. [VicHealth LGA action guide](#).
- Support activities in the [VicHealth Local Government Partnership \(VLGP\)](#) 'Building Food Systems' module.
- 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. These public settings can contact the [Healthy Eating Advisory Service](#) for information and advice. Children's settings can get started by joining [Vic Kids Eat Well](#), statewide initiative designed to help settings make 'bite size' changes to their food offerings in line with healthy choices.
- Encourage sporting clubs to participate in the [Good Sports Program](#) to prevent alcohol harm, smoking and promote healthy eating.
- Use and promote the [Rethink Sugary Drink](#) resources

> Connect your community with local oral health services and programs

- Promote information about the [Child Dental Benefits Schedule](#) for eligible families.
- Encourage schools to participate in the [Smile Squad - School Dental Program](#).
- Find your closest [public dental clinics](#) and learn who is [eligible](#) for public dental care.

> Support oral health promotion settings

- Support Maternal and Child Health Nurse services to promote oral health and work with public dental services to develop referral pathways for children with identified dental needs. Access information through the [DHSV website](#) and the [Healthy Families, Healthy Smiles](#) program.
- Encourage early childhood services and schools to adopt healthy eating policies. Services may engage the [Healthy Eating Advisory Service](#) for information and advice on menu planning and assessment or use the FoodChecker tool.
- Access information on oral health promotion for early childhood settings such as libraries, supported play groups and education and care services through [DHSV Oral Health Programs](#), Healthy Families Healthy Smiles and Smiles 4 Miles.
- Support and encourage participation of early childhood services and schools in the [Achievement Program](#), particularly achievement of the healthy eating and oral health benchmarks.
- Support and encourage schools, out of school hours care, sports clubs, sports and recreation facilities, community and council owned facilities to adopt and implement [Vic Kids Eat Well](#).
- Implement evidence-based programs like the [INFANT Program](#) to help families with healthy eating, active play and reduced screen time in the early years.
- Promote oral health in aged, [disability](#), youth, refugee and Aboriginal programs.

> 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](#). Provide training and resources to enable staff working in relevant programs to deliver evidence based oral health promotion. [Oral health planning resources](#).