

# Victorian action plan to prevent oral disease 2020–30



### Acknowledgement of Aboriginal Victoria

The Victorian Government proudly acknowledges Victoria's Aboriginal communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past and present. We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we live, work and play. We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal people and communities to Victorian life and how this enriches our society more broadly. We embrace the spirit of self-determination and reconciliation, working towards equality of outcomes and ensuring an equitable voice.

Victorian Aboriginal communities and peoples are culturally diverse, with rich and varied heritages and histories both pre and post-invasion. The impacts of colonisation – while having devastating effects on the traditional life of Aboriginal Nations – have not diminished Aboriginal people's connection to country, culture or community. Aboriginal Nations continue to strengthen and grow with the resurgence of language, lore and cultural knowledge. These rich and varied histories need to be understood and acknowledged by all Victorians, to truly understand the resilience and strength of previous generations, as well as the history of the fight for survival, justice and country that has taken place across Victoria and around Australia.

As we work together to ensure Victorian Aboriginal communities continue to thrive, the government acknowledges the invaluable contributions of generations of Aboriginal warriors that have come before us, who have fought tirelessly for the rights of their people and communities towards Aboriginal self-determination. We are now honoured to be part of that vision.

To receive this publication in an accessible format, email Community Based Health Policy and Programs <AACServdev@dhhs.vic.gov.au>

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

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This publication may contain images of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Where the term 'Aboriginal' is used it refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Indigenous is retained when it is part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

ISBN 978-1-76069-427-2 (Print)

ISBN 978-1-76069-428-9 (pdf, online, MS word)

Available at Victorian action plan to prevent oral disease <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/>> (1803018)

## Minister's foreword



Oral health is important for overall health and wellbeing. While there have been significant improvements over the past 30 years, there is still evidence of poor oral health among many Victorians. Oral disease causes pain and discomfort. It is among the most prevalent diseases in our community and also one of the most costly health conditions to treat; yet it is one of the most preventable.

This plan sets out a vision to achieve good oral health for all Victorians by 2030 and to reduce the gap in oral health for people who are at higher risk of oral disease.

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.

This year the Victorian Government has invested more into public dental care than ever before. The School Dental Program will provide free dental examinations and follow-up treatment for all children at government primary and secondary schools across Victoria. The \$321.9 million initiative will make it easier for children to access dental care with Smile Squad dental vans visiting all public schools and providing students with a free dental pack each year to promote ongoing oral health. The initiative will save families around \$400 a year per child in dental costs as well as the inconvenience of taking time off work for appointments. This new investment will reduce wait times for other Victorians seeking public dental treatment, as the children who would otherwise be treated through the public dental scheme will now receive their care at school.

The Victorian Government is proud to be investing in the oral health of children to provide a good foundation for lifelong oral health, which will ensure that they are best placed for education, work and adult life.

As well as dramatically expanding public provision of free dental care, we will maintain a focus on preventive care and oral health promotion to reduce the social, physical and economic burden of oral ill-health in the community.

This action plan is based on extensive consultation coordinated by Dental Health Services Victoria. I would like to thank members of Dental Health Services Victoria's Population Health Committee and staff from community dental agencies who were among the more than 550 people participating in consultation forums.

Victoria is building on a strong foundation of innovative and effective oral health initiatives and partnerships.

I am pleased to release the *Victorian action plan to prevent oral disease 2020–30*. Together we have created a plan to improve oral health and reduce inequalities. I invite you to join me in working to achieve excellent oral health for all Victorians.

The Hon Jenny Mikakos  
Minister for Health

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## Introduction

The Victorian Government recognises that oral health is important to a person's overall general health and wellbeing and is committed to improving the oral health of Victorians, particularly children.

A healthy mouth enables people to eat, speak and socialise without pain, discomfort or embarrassment.

This plan sets out a vision to achieve good oral health for all Victorians by 2030, with a focus on reducing the gap in oral health for people who are at higher risk of oral disease.

There have been significant improvements in oral health over the last 20 to 30 years, however there is still evidence of poor oral health among many Victorians.

Oral diseases can cause pain and discomfort and negatively affect general health and quality of life. Poor oral health has been associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory diseases, stroke, adverse pregnancy outcomes, stomach ulcers, oral cancers and obesity. The impact of poor oral health can also create a financial burden for individuals and within the broader health system.

In preparing this strategy, Dental Health Services Victoria and the Department of Health and Human Services consulted with more than 550 people across six consultation workshops. Participants included members from Dental Health Services Victoria's Population Health Committee; oral health staff from community dental agencies; and consumers and stakeholders from the health, early childhood, education, social services and local government sectors. Their input informs every aspect of this whole-of-government strategy for Victoria.



## The burden of oral disease

The burden of oral disease comes from four main conditions: tooth decay, gum disease, oral cancer and oral trauma. Oral diseases are among the most common and costly health problems experienced by Victorians.

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. Gum disease is the fifth most common health problem and more than 200 Victorians die of oral cancer each year.



**43%**

of all children aged 5–10 years have signs of tooth decay

### Main causes

- Sugar in foods and drinks
- Lack of preventive effects of fluoride and plaque on teeth
- Broader social determinants of health



**51%**

of adults aged 55–74 years are affected by gum disease

### Main causes

- Plaque on gum margins of teeth
- Smoking and diabetes
- Broader social determinants of health



**14**

oral cancer cases are diagnosed each week on average

### Main causes

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

## Children

Almost half of all children aged five to 10 years have signs of tooth decay. About 37 per cent of tooth decay in high-risk preschoolers is early stage disease. This can be reversed through preventive treatment such as fluoride varnish programs.

There is considerable inequality in the distribution of oral disease, with some groups of children more likely to have advanced tooth decay than the general population.

Advanced tooth decay is more prevalent in children with:

- a parent who has a health care card

**1.8x**



- an Aboriginal background

**1.9x**



- families who do not speak English at home

**2.1x**



## Adults

More than 90 per cent of adults are affected by tooth decay, with one in three (32 per cent) experiencing untreated tooth decay. The 2011–12 Victorian Population Health Survey found that:

- fair or poor self-rated oral health is associated with lower educational levels, high or very high psychological distress levels, physical inactivity, not meeting fruit and vegetable consumption guidelines, smoking, and fair or poor self-reported general health
- in women, fair or poor self-rated oral health is associated with obesity and diabetes, while in men it is associated with not being in the labour force, having a long-term risk of alcohol-related harm and being underweight
- there is also a tendency for people on lower incomes to have poor dental visiting patterns, with cost being a barrier.

## Older adults

Older people experience high levels of oral disease which are associated with general health problems such as diabetes, changes in diet, increased use of medication, and the breakdown of heavily restored teeth. Poor oral health makes it difficult to eat a nutritious diet. There are high levels of oral disease in residential aged care facilities and in the general community. Seniors have higher levels of oral disease than younger people. This is a particular problem for those who are receiving Commonwealth support at home or in residential aged care facilities.

## What we currently do

In Victoria, we are building from a strong foundation of innovative and effective oral health initiatives and partnerships in Victoria. There are many examples of successful programs and leadership, some of which are highlighted below.

### Healthy Families Healthy Smiles

This program aims to improve the oral health of young children, their families and pregnant women by building the knowledge and skills of health and early childhood professionals to promote oral health.

Under the program, more than 3,000 professionals, including midwives, maternal child health nurses, early parenting practitioners, Aboriginal health staff, early childhood educators and supported playgroup facilitators, have been trained to promote oral health.



### Smiles 4 Miles

This program works in partnership with community health services to improve the oral health behaviours of preschoolers, their families and early childhood staff. Smiles 4 Miles promotes three key messages: drink well, eat well and clean well. It is affiliated with the Achievement Program, which supports the development of healthy environments.

In 2019, 730 services are participating in Smiles 4 Miles, reaching more than 45,800 children across Victoria.



### Water fluoridation

Community water fluoridation is the most effective population-wide intervention to prevent tooth decay. Majority of Victorians living in Metropolitan Melbourne have access to water fluoridation. However, there are still many Victorians living in rural and regional areas without access to this important public health initiative. Since 2013–14, five water fluoridation plants have been built giving more than 76,000 people across 14 towns access to fluoridated drinking water.

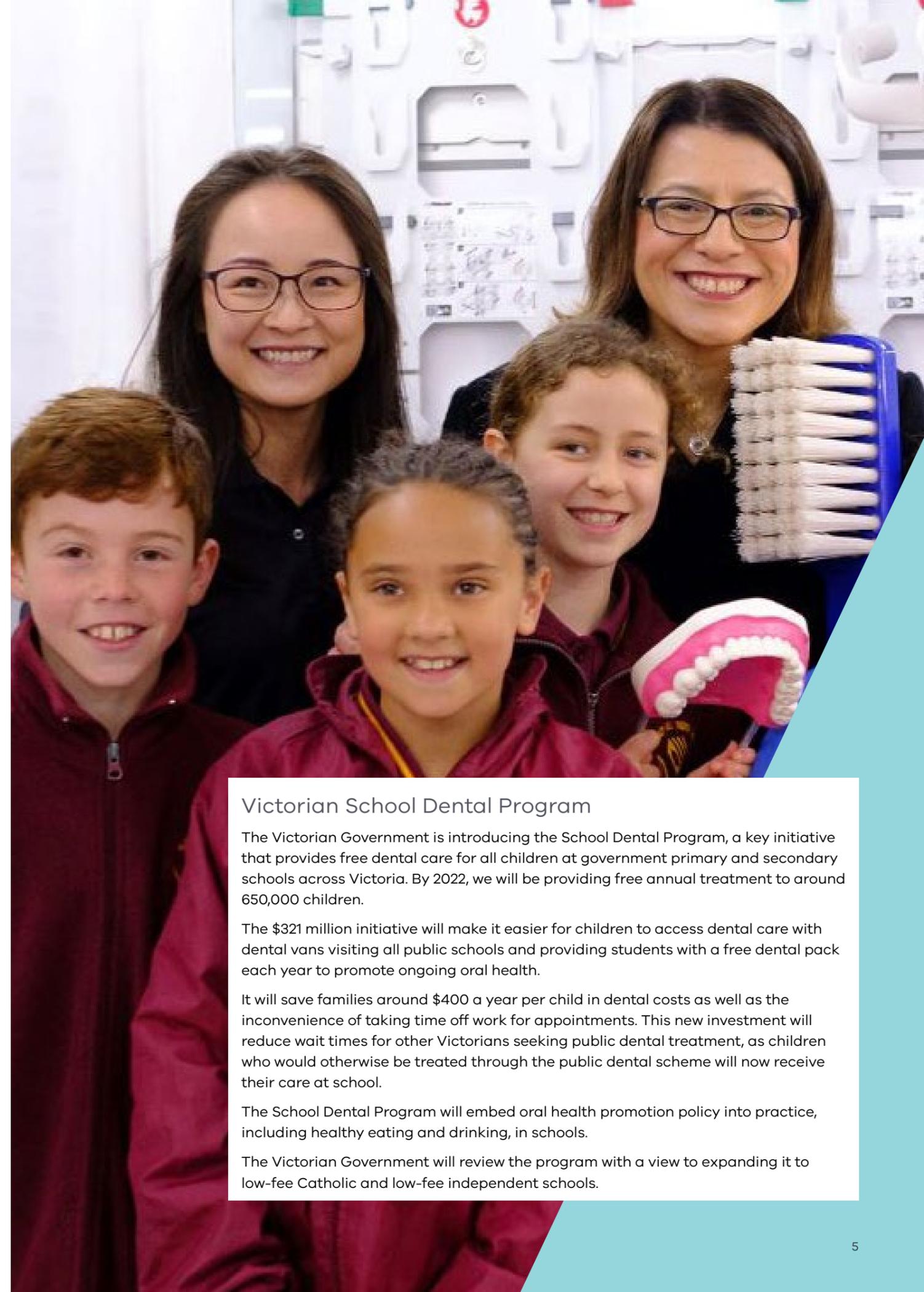


### Supporting every smile

In collaboration with disability sector partners, Dental Health Services Victoria has developed an online package to promote good oral health in disability services.

Supporting every smile shows disability service providers ways to incorporate oral health promoting actions into their support models. The program provides information and strategies to promote healthy environments and behaviours every day.

It also includes consumer-tested Easy Read oral health information, which can be shared with service users and their families.



### Victorian School Dental Program

The Victorian Government is introducing the School Dental Program, a key initiative that provides free dental care for all children at government primary and secondary schools across Victoria. By 2022, we will be providing free annual treatment to around 650,000 children.

The \$321 million initiative will make it easier for children to access dental care with dental vans visiting all public schools and providing students with a free dental pack each year to promote ongoing oral health.

It will save families around \$400 a year per child in dental costs as well as the inconvenience of taking time off work for appointments. This new investment will reduce wait times for other Victorians seeking public dental treatment, as children who would otherwise be treated through the public dental scheme will now receive their care at school.

The School Dental Program will embed oral health promotion policy into practice, including healthy eating and drinking, in schools.

The Victorian Government will review the program with a view to expanding it to low-fee Catholic and low-fee independent schools.

## The 2020–30 action plan

This action plan focuses on opportunities for oral health promotion across the life course for mothers and babies, children and young people, adults and older people. Every stage in life has its unique challenges, for example:

- pregnant women can experience increased risks of gum disease and tooth decay
- early childhood is when many lifetime habits are established and offers the opportunity to develop good oral health habits and prevent oral disease
- older people have a higher frequency of gum disease and oral cancers.

## Populations and settings

The focus is across the life course



Pregnancy



Infancy  
0–4 years



Childhood and adolescence  
5–17 years



Adults and older adults

The places where Victorians conduct their daily lives are important in influencing their ability to prevent oral disease. This action plan focuses on promoting oral health in key settings, such as early childhood services, schools, health services and residential aged care and disability settings.

## Outcomes for 2030

Our vision of good oral health for all Victorians will be achieved through four action areas:

- **Priority 1:** Improve the oral health of children
- **Priority 2:** Promote healthy environments
- **Priority 3:** Improve oral health literacy
- **Priority 4:** Improve oral health promotion, screening, early detection and prevention services

Our goals for 2030 are:

Increase the proportion of children entering primary school without dental cavities to <b>85%</b>	Decrease the proportion of Victorian adults with moderate or severe gum disease to <b>23%</b>	Increase the proportion of rural and regional Victorians accessing fluoridated drinking water to <b>95%</b>	Increase the relative five-year survival rate for Victorians with oral cancer to <b>75%</b>
<b>Baseline 64%</b>	<b>Baseline 26%</b>	<b>Baseline 87%</b>	<b>Baseline 66%</b>

## Victorian action plan to prevent oral disease 2020–30

### Vision

*Good oral health for all Victorians by 2030*

### Outcomes

Victorian school children have improved oral health for life

Victorians will benefit from settings and environments that support good oral health

Victorians have knowledge, skills and resources to improve their oral health

Victorians have access to oral health promotion programs, screening, early detection and prevention services

### Actions

#### Priority 1

Improve the oral health of children

#### Priority 2

Promote healthy environments

#### Priority 3

Improve oral health literacy

#### Priority 4

Improve oral health promotion, screening, early detection and prevention services

### What will be different

Victorian families know what to do to ensure their children have good oral health

Victorian children receive free annual screening, early detection services, follow-up treatment and oral health promotion in all government schools

Victorians are supported to make healthy food and drink choices in the places they live, learn, work and play

More Victorians have access to either fluoridated water or topical fluorides and affordable oral health products to protect their teeth from decay

Victorians at higher risk have enhanced oral health knowledge, skills and resources to prevent tooth decay and gum disease and reduce oral cancer

Victorians at higher risk are aware of the dental services available to them and how to access them

More Victorians have access to prevention-focused, high value patient centered dental care

More Victorians benefit from oral health promotion programs, screening and early detection services. Effective referral and follow-up pathways are implemented across primary, community and tertiary care settings

### Priority actions

Provide oral health promotion, screening, early detection services and free treatment to children via the School Dental Program

Provide tooth packs with oral health promotion to children via the School Dental Program

Embed oral health promotion policy into practice, including healthy eating and drinking, in schools via the School Dental Program

Oral health policies and practices in a wide range of settings are improved

Healthy food and drink choices in places people live, learn, work and play

Increase access to water fluoridation

Increase oral health knowledge, skills and resources to prevent oral disease

Increase awareness of dental services and how to access them

Dental services deliver prevention focused, high value, person-centered care

Provide oral health promotion programs with screening, early detection, effective referral and follow-up

Increase access to oral health promotion programs and services  
Improved prevention skills within the workforce

### Principles that support the strategy

Evidence-informed oral disease prevention policy, programs and services

Enhanced evaluation to inform the evidence base and future activity

The oral health status of Victorians is well understood

Quality data is available at both population and service level for planning, monitoring and evaluation



## Priority 1: Improve the oral health of children

### Victorian school children have improved oral health for life

#### What will be different

- Victorian families know what to do to ensure their children have good oral health
- Victorian children receive free annual screening, early detection services, follow-up treatment and oral health promotion in all government schools.

#### Priority actions

##### Improve access to oral health care in schools

- Provide free dental examinations and follow-up treatment to children in all Victorian government schools by 2022 via the School Dental Program.
- Provide oral health promotion, screening and early detection services to children via the School Dental Program, including fluoride varnish and fissure sealants.
- Promote the oral health of children and their families via the School Dental Program.
- Increase the use of mouthguards in schools.

##### Improve service systems

- Embed oral health promotion policy into practice in schools, including healthy eating and drinking, in schools via the School Dental Program.
- Collaborate with prevention initiatives in schools to promote oral health via the Achievement Program and the Healthy Eating Advisory Service.



“The maternal and child health nurse looked in our daughter’s mouth and said the teeth and gums look good. She also told us we can use a cloth to clean our daughter’s teeth and not to put our baby to bed with the bottle.”

## Priority 2: Promote healthy environments

### Victorians will benefit from settings and environments that support good oral health

#### What will be different

- Victorians are supported to make healthy food and drink choices in the places they live, learn, work and play.
- More Victorians have access to fluoridated water or topical fluorides and affordable oral health products to protect their teeth from decay.

#### Priority actions

##### Improve oral health policies and practice in key places

- Embed oral health promotion policy into practice, including healthy eating and drinking in key places such as early childhood services, supported playgroups, schools, sports and recreation clubs, hospitals, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and residential services.
- Promote the oral health of children and their families through the expansion of prevention initiatives such as Smiles 4 Miles and Healthy Families Healthy Smiles.
- Increase the use of mouthguards in sport, recreation and leisure settings.

##### Increase access to the benefits of fluoride

- Increase the coverage of fluoridated drinking water.
- Provide other fluoride measures, such as fluoride varnish programs to populations at higher risk of tooth decay, such as preschool children and older people in residential aged care facilities.
- Collaborate with water businesses to promote the benefits of drinking water, preferably fluoridated water.



“The maternal and child health nurse checked my son’s teeth at his three and a half-year-old check.”

## Priority 3: Improve oral health literacy

### Victorians have knowledge, skills and resources to improve their oral health

#### What will be different

- Victorians at higher risk have enhanced oral health knowledge, skills and resources to prevent tooth decay and gum disease and reduce oral cancer.
- Victorians at higher risk are aware of the dental services available to them and how to access them.

#### Priority actions

##### Improve oral health literacy

- Health and social services distribute tooth packs with oral health promotion messages to Victorians at higher risk, including families at higher risk, people with alcohol and drug dependencies and homeless people.
- Work with higher risk groups to improve oral health knowledge and identify and address barriers in a language, setting and format that suits their needs and preferences. For example, when communicating avoid jargon; use pictures and plain language messages that people can act on to achieve the best oral health.
- Utilise health-based technology to include oral health to help consumers manage and monitor their own oral health.
- Include oral health information in other health information resources, such as on diabetes and obesity.
- Advocate to the Australian Government for a national oral health literacy campaign.

##### Improve oral health professionals understanding of oral health literacy

- Improve oral health professionals’ understanding of each person’s cultural needs, beliefs and practices.
- Enhance the skills of oral health professionals to promote consistent, evidence-based and easily understood information to prevent oral disease.
- Enhance the skills of health, early childhood, education and social services workers to promote oral health and strengthen referral pathways to oral health professionals.



“The midwife asked me about my teeth. My midwife told me to see the dentist and to keep good oral hygiene during my pregnancy. Because of the midwife I am brushing my teeth regularly and have made an appointment to see the dentist.”

## Priority 4: Improve oral health promotion, screening, early detection and prevention services

### Victorians have access to oral health promotion programs, screening, early detection and prevention services

#### What will be different

- More Victorians have access to prevention-focused, high value and patient-centered dental care.
- More Victorians benefit from oral health promotion programs, screening and early identification services. Effective referral and follow-up pathways are implemented across primary, community and tertiary care settings.

#### Priority actions

##### Improve access to prevention services

- Include oral health promotion at key points across the life course, for example, pregnancy, maternal and child health key ages and stages consultations, early childhood prevention programs, and residential services.
- Provide oral health promotion, screening and early detection programs to all children via early childhood services and supported playgroups, including outreach services such as fluoride varnish programs.
- Implement the Oral Cancer Screening and Prevention Program to enhance targeted screening and early detection of oral cancer for people at higher risk.

##### Improve service systems

- Advocate to the Australian Government to include oral health in other health assessments to identify people with, or at risk of, oral disease and provide information and referral to dental services. For example, include oral health assessment in the Aboriginal children health assessment, the type 2 diabetes risk evaluation, chronic disease assessments, and the assessment for people aged 75 years and older.
- Enhance oral health referral and follow-up systems including via digital and online platforms.

## Next steps: towards 2030

To progress the identified priority actions, a work plan will be developed by Dental Health Services Victoria via their Population Health Committee in conjunction with the Department of Health and Human Services and other key partners.

### Monitoring and review

We will monitor and review our progress in implementing the *Victorian action plan to prevent oral disease 2020–30*.

Outcome measures and indicators will be incorporated so that achievements can be evaluated. Time-limited working groups and other mechanisms will be established to advise and progress work on specific priority actions.

