

Improving oral health

Fact sheet: October 2024

Key facts

Globally, 3.5 billion people suffer from oral diseases such as dental caries, severe gum disease, tooth loss and oral cancers. This burden is especially high in the WHO Western Pacific Region: more than 800 million people – 42% of the population – are affected.

Oral health is closely linked to overall health. Poor oral health can lead to other health problems. General health issues can also affect oral health.

Although most oral diseases are preventable and treatable in the early stages, high out-of-pocket expenses make oral health care unaffordable for many people.

Oral diseases affect people of all ages. In the Western Pacific Region, the rate of oral diseases has grown by 30% over the past 30 years. One in five adults over age 60 have lost all their teeth. Poor oral health throughout life leads to fewer remaining teeth in older age, causing difficulty in eating, poor nutrition and a lower quality of life. Tooth loss is the end-point of a long history of untreated oral disease and highlights social and economic inequalities, with disadvantaged populations disproportionately experiencing total tooth loss.

Oral diseases share risk factors with other noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular diseases. These include eating too much sugar, tobacco use and harmful alcohol use. Due to risk factors, as well as the significant burden and the stark inequalities in the prevalence of oral diseases, these diseases add to the NCD burden and impact health systems and economies in the Region.

Oral health care is often not included in national universal health coverage (UHC) packages, making it hard for people to get the care they need. The effects of oral diseases are widespread, leading to physical, social and psychological problems such as low self-confidence and reduced quality of life, affecting social participation.

Most oral diseases can be prevented with good self-care and cost-effective public health measures. Addressing the social, commercial and political factors that affect oral health can reduce the high burden of oral diseases and their long-term effects.

WHO response

A detailed overview of the burden of oral diseases, available resources for oral health and future challenges in the Western Pacific Region can be found in the regional summary of the WHO *Global oral health status report: Towards universal health coverage for oral health by 2030*. The report includes country profiles and can help track progress against oral diseases.

The WHO *Global Strategy and Action Plan on Oral Health (2023–2030)*, or GOHAP, was developed in response to a 2021 World Health Assembly resolution calling for a shift in oral health policy planning from traditional restorative dental care to a focus on promoting and preventing oral health issues. The six objectives of GOHAP are improving oral health governance, promotion and prevention, workforce, care services, information systems and research.

Guided by the strategic objectives of GOHAP, WHO is supporting Member States in the Region by:

- strengthening oral health governance and research, including tracking oral health data to ensure better policy-making, as well as political and resource support;
- engaging families, communities, schools and society in efforts to prevent oral diseases and promote lifelong oral health; and
- integrating essential oral health care into primary health care, including the workforce, access to care, supplies and information systems.

WHO is working on accelerating the implementation of GOHAP in the Region, making oral health an integral part of UHC and improving access to essential oral health services for all, especially vulnerable populations.

