

Australia's dental health:

DO WE NEED TO BRUSH UP?

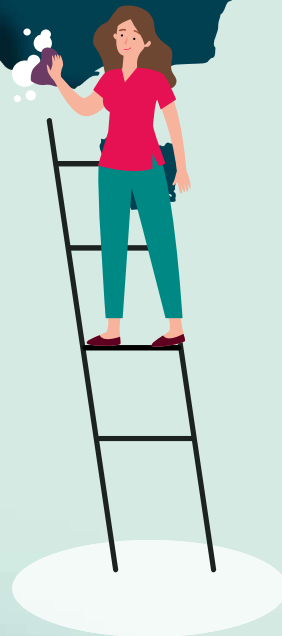


HOW DOES AUSTRALIA PERFORM ON THE GLOBAL DENTAL FIELD? HERE'S A SNAPSHOT OF OUR TEETH AND DENTAL HYGIENE

Words Gina Flaxman

We may be starved for international sport this year, but we sure have kept an eye on those country-on-country health comparison charts. When it comes to the world's most prevalent disease, how does Australia's rate of tooth decay track against the competition?

About 4 billion people – half the world's population — have untreated tooth decay, estimates Dr Michael Foley, chair of the Australian Dental Association (ADA)'s Oral Health Committee. That's half the planet chewing their lunch with a precursor for cavities, gum disease



SOURCES: AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PROsthodontISTS, GLOBAL HEALTH JOURNAL, YOUNG COLOUK, CANCER COUNCIL VICTORIA, ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS HEALTH AFFAIRS, FDI WORLD DENTAL FEDERATION, ILLUSTRATIONS: ISTOCK

and abscesses. "People forget that tooth decay is the most common disease in the world," he says.

According to Australia's Adult Oral Health Tracker 2020, a progress report created by the ADA and the Australian Health Policy Collaboration, 32% of Aussie adults have untreated tooth decay, which puts us roughly on par with the latest figures from the UK. And while almost one in three people with decaying teeth may seem shocking, Dr Foley says overall, Australia's dental health is good compared with other countries.

Very few Australians have dentures now, he says – only 10% of adults have severe tooth loss (fewer than 21 teeth). In contrast, about the same percentage of Americans have no teeth whatsoever. Australia has seen a dramatic improvement in this area in the past 50 years because of high levels of water fluoridation, says Dr Foley, with 89% of us having access to fluoridated drinking water.

But, while our number of adults with decaying teeth may be relatively low on a global scale, we've seen a 6% increase on our 2004–06 numbers. We also have more gum disease now – a 9% jump over the same period.

There's ample room for improvement on Australia's score card. Only half of our adult population brush their teeth twice a day, putting us slightly ahead of China but a little behind the UK, where 59% do the same. And while the 2020 Tracker reports that 49% of Australian adults had a dental check-up in the previous year, OECD figures for 2009 show more Canadians (65%), Britons (69%) and Czechs (71%) taking care of their annual dental visits.

fast fact

1.43 billion litres

The amount of sugary drinks Australian adults consume each year.

Source: National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey

KIDS' TEETH STATS

Our children's teeth need some brushing up, too. One in four kids aged between five and 10 has untreated tooth decay and each year, more than 26,000 Australian children under the age of 15 are admitted to hospital because they have decay or holes in their teeth.

The poor dental health of our children is due to several factors. A study last year found 76% of Australians don't know when they should take their baby to a dentist.

According to the ADA, the earlier your child visits the dentist the better: "It's time for your baby to see the dentist for the first time when their first tooth becomes visible or when they reach 12 months of age, whichever comes first."

Also, 77% of parents allow their young children to brush their own teeth unsupervised. "It depends on the child,

but if they can write their name legibly and tie their own shoelaces, they can probably brush fairly well," says Dr Foley. "If not, you should do the job for them or tidy up at the end. You need a good level of manual dexterity to make sure you get the back of your teeth and gums."

TIPS FOR BETTER ORAL HEALTH

Dr Foley's number one tip for all Australians is to cut down on the sweet stuff, specifically sugary drinks. As a nation, 47% of Aussie adults consume too much 'free sugar': sugar added to foods and drinks, and sugars naturally found in honey, syrups, fruit juices and fruit concentrates.

The moral of the story? Brush twice a day and, according to Dr Foley: "Brush your gums as well as your teeth – and the bits you don't see." He says brushing twice and flossing once a day is enough. "If you brush three times a day, the difference is virtually negligible." ♦



The lucky country

Access to fluoridated water and affordable fluoride toothpaste are both important defences against tooth decay. In Australia, it costs 0.2 of a day's household spend to buy a year's supply of toothpaste. In Zambia, toothpaste accounts for 30.4 days' spend over a year.

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