

National Call To Action To Promote Oral Health A Public-Private Partnership

*under the leadership of
The Office of the Surgeon General*

Action 1. Change Perceptions of Oral Health

For too long, the perception that oral health is in some way less important than and separate from general health has been deeply ingrained in American consciousness. Activities to overcome these attitudes and beliefs can start at the grassroots level, which can then lead to a coordinated national movement to increase oral health literacy, defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic oral and craniofacial information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. By raising Americans' level of awareness and understanding of oral health, people can make informed decisions and articulate their expectations of what they, their communities, and oral health professionals can contribute to improving health; health professionals and researchers can benefit from work with oral health partners; and policymakers can commit to including oral health in health policies. In this way, the prevention, early detection, and management of diseases of the dental, oral, and craniofacial tissues can become integrated in health care, community-based programs, and social services, and promote the general health and well-being of all Americans.

Implementation strategies to change perceptions are needed at local, state, regional, and national levels and for all population groups. All stakeholders should work together and use data in order to:

Change public perceptions

- Enhance oral health literacy.
- Develop messages that are culturally sensitive and linguistically competent.
- Enhance knowledge of the value of regular, professional oral health care.
- Increase the understanding of how the signs and symptoms of oral infections can indicate general health status and act as a marker for other diseases.

Change policymakers' perceptions

- Inform policymakers and administrators at local, state, and federal levels of the results of oral health research and programs and of the oral health status of their constituencies.
- Develop concise and relevant messages for policymakers.
- Document the health and quality-of-life outcomes that result from the inclusion (or exclusion) of oral health services in programs and reimbursement schedules.

Change health providers' perceptions

- Review and update health professional educational curricula and continuing education courses to include content on oral health and the association between oral health and general health.
- Train health care providers to conduct oral screenings as part of routine physical exams and make appropriate referrals.
- Promote interdisciplinary training of medical, oral health, and allied health professional personnel in counseling patients about how to reduce risk factors common to oral and general health.
- Encourage oral health providers to refer patients to other health specialists as warranted by examinations and history. Similarly, encourage medical and surgical providers to refer patients for oral health care when medical or surgical treatments that may impact oral health are planned.

Action 2. Overcome Barriers by Replicating Effective Programs and Proven Efforts

Enhance health promotion and health literacy. Public policies and community interventions to make health care and information more accessible have been effective. So have been efforts to encourage healthier lifestyles and increase

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interventions for prevention or early detection of disease by changing the environment (the places where people work, play, learn, or live). Expansion of community-based health promotion and disease prevention programs, including increasing understanding of what individuals can do to enhance oral health, is essential if the needs of the public are to be met. Policies and programs concerning tobacco cessation, dietary choices, wearing protective gear for sports, and other lifestyle-related efforts not only will benefit oral health, but are natural ways to integrate oral health promotion with promotion of general health and well-being.

Many Americans don't know why oral health is important, they don't know all they can do to preserve their oral health, and may not recognize signs indicating that they are in trouble. Several oral health campaigns are raising awareness of why oral health is important and how to access care, such as a nationwide campaign by the American Dental Association emphasizing the importance of the early diagnosis of oral cancer. It is encouraging that messages like these are being communicated--through public service announcements, campaigns, and all the venues available in today's media-conscious culture. More needs to be done to increase the health literacy of the public.

Implementation strategies to overcome barriers in oral health disparities need to engage all groups, particularly those most vulnerable, in the development of oral health care programs that work to eliminate health disparities and aim to:

Enhance health promotion and health literacy

- Apply strategies to enhance the adoption and maintenance of proven community-based and clinical interventions, such as community water fluoridation and dental sealants application.
- Identify the knowledge, opinions, and practices of the public, health care providers, and policymakers with regard to oral diseases and oral health.
- Engage populations and community organizations in the development of health promotion and health literacy action plans.
- Publicize successful programs that promote oral health to facilitate their replication.
- Develop and support programs promoting general health that include activities supporting oral health (such as wearing oral facial protection, tobacco cessation, good nutrition).

Action 3. Build the Science Base and Accelerate Science Transfer

If the public and their care providers are to benefit from research, efforts are needed to transfer new oral knowledge into improved means of diagnosis, treatment, and prevention. The public needs to be informed, accurately and often, of findings that affect their health. They need clear descriptions of the results from research and demonstration projects concerning lifestyle behaviors and disease prevention practices. At the same time, research is needed to determine the effect of oral health literacy on oral health.

Action 4. Increase Oral Health Workforce Diversity, Capacity, and Flexibility

The patient pool of any health care provider tends to mirror the provider's own racial and ethnic background. As such, the provider can play a catalytic role as a community spokesperson, addressing key health problems and service needs.

Implementation strategies to increase diversity, capacity, and flexibility must be applied to all components of the workforce: research, education, and both private and public health administration and practice. Efforts are needed to:

Ensure a sufficient workforce pool to meet health care needs

- Provide training in communication skills and cultural competence to health care providers and students.