



## Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General

Lack of knowledge can affect care. If parents are not familiar with the importance and care of their child's primary teeth or if they do not know that dental sealants exist, they are unlikely to take appropriate action or seek professional services. If the public is not aware of the benefits of community water fluoridation, public referenda and funding for such interventions are not likely to be supported. Similarly, if individuals do not know that an oral cancer examination exists, they may not ask about the need for one. However, it is well established that knowledge alone will not necessarily lead to appropriate practices. For example, even if individuals know that tobacco use is unhealthy and that it contributes to multiple life-threatening illnesses, some continue to smoke. The majority of people who need such information most—those in low-income groups and those with lower levels of education—also are the ones who lack the information and skills (oral health literacy) to ask for and obtain specific preventive services or treatment options. Health professionals are in an ideal position to provide up-to-date health information and care to their patients. They also have an opportunity to enhance their knowledge and practices as well as increase their communication to patients about the procedures they provide and the reasons for these procedures.

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As the health professional curriculum evolves, so must efforts in K-12 education and beyond to improve the public's health literacy. Efforts directed toward improving science and health knowledge and attitudes and at implementing health-promoting practices have begun; these can contribute to an enhanced partnership between patients and their health care providers.

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Health care providers, program administrators, local, state, and government administrators, educators, scientists, and leaders, among others, have proposed ways of promoting health and preventing disease that respond to the principal health determinants presented in the chapter. Thus, efforts can be directed toward changing the environment to make it more life-enhancing; establishing new public health policies; enhancing health literacy to encourage healthy behaviors and lifestyles; working at the microlevel of neighborhoods and communities on health-related measures; and orienting health care to meet the needs of a changing society.

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The challenges for oral health in the twenty-first century are formidable. First and foremost is the need to ensure that all people have access to health care and can acquire the health literacy necessary to make use of health promotion and disease prevention information and activities.

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Measures such as improved sanitation and housing, prenatal care, immunizations, health education and promotion, community water fluoridation, and dental sealants have greatly improved oral health for the majority of the population. Advances in science and technology, health professional education, the science of public health and clinical practice, and the health literacy of the public will continue to improve the health and well-being of Americans in the coming years.

At the most basic level, local, state, and national health care policies will continue to strive to improve the health status of all Americans. Major reforms will improve public health competency. Enlightened health literacy will continue to influence quality of life expectations. Many social, economic, and political influences will continue to influence local, state, and national priorities for health policies.

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Demand measures a population's health literacy, willingness, and capacity to utilize and finance health services. Public health literacy or competency and proactive oral health education will increase demand as well as delineate functions of oral health professionals for 2000 and beyond.

To ensure that all people have access to health care and can acquire the health literacy necessary to make use of oral and craniofacial health promotion and disease prevention information and activities, a complete assessment of the nation's capacity to achieve access for all is warranted. Federal, state, and local government programs, legislation, and regulation; health professional societies and organizations; professional schools, colleges within universities, and K-12 education; patient groups; the private sector; and the larger society have the responsibility to achieve access to oral health care for all.