

National Preventive Health Strategy

Preventive health measures aim to reduce illness, prevent disease and promote wellness.

The increasing prevalence of chronic disease in Australia intensifies the need for investment in evidence-based preventive health strategies.

Australia spends less on public health and preventive care than most other OECD countries. Peaking at 2.3% of recurrent expenditure on health in 2007-08, Australia's prevention spending fell to 1.6% in 2017-18. Comparatively, most OECD countries spend between 2% and 4% of total health expenditure on prevention.

Much of the burden from chronic disease is preventable through reduced exposure to modifiable risk factors including tobacco use, obesity, alcohol and other drugs use, physical inactivity, sugar consumption, high blood pressure, abnormal blood fats (such as cholesterol) and high blood sugar.

Preventive health strategies have been shown to reduce future budgetary pressures by improving health system resource use and promoting greater workforce participation and productivity.

Prevention, including improving health literacy, is identified by governments as a priority for health system reform, with a 10-year National Preventative Health Strategy (the Strategy) currently under development. The Draft Strategy, released April 2021, outlines that funding for preventive health will increase to 5% by 2030.

AHHA POSITION:

- ✧ Funding for preventive health should initially target a return to 2.3% of recurrent health expenditure, to be progressively increased to 5% of recurrent expenditure over a 5-year period, with a dedicated focus on ensuring spending is on activities with demonstrated cost-effectiveness. The Strategy should define the responsibilities of Australian, state and territory, and local governments.
- ✧ It should align with other Australian Government health strategies, including those in the areas of primary health, mental health, women's, men's and children's health, suicide prevention, health workforce, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, maternity services and oral health.
- ✧ Primary Health Networks (PHNs) play a key role in population health planning, health governance and cross-sector coordination. Governance and funding mechanisms are needed that build on the existing planning, coordinating, and commissioning capacities of PHNs to embed prevention as a core element of their work.
- ✧ Cross-sector, population-wide, targeted approaches are needed that are informed by evidence, local and international experience, and co-designed with community partners.
- ✧ A life course approach to prevention is required which addresses the social determinants of health and promotes place-based preventive health solutions that are culturally safe, effective and accessible.
- ✧ The influence of the environment on health must be recognised. Local and state governments, including urban and regional planning services, should be engaged to ensure the environments where we live, work, socialise and learn encourage and facilitate healthy lifestyles. Areas such as pollution reduction, nature conservation, homelessness, food security, affordable transport and education must be in scope in planning for better health and wellbeing.
- ✧ The importance of building a strong foundation for good physical, cognitive, social and emotional health in the first 2,000 days of life must be recognised.
- ✧ Improved evidence-based pathways for early detection, diagnosis and treatment of disease should be a focus of the Strategy, with funding for both promotion and service delivery.
- ✧ Resources should be directed towards key areas of concern, including inequality, overweight and obesity, alcohol misuse and abuse, sugar consumption, tobacco control, screening programs, oral health, health literacy and immunisation.
- ✧ Oral conditions are the third leading cause of acute preventable hospital admissions. Targeted oral health prevention programs and the fluoridation of all water supplies should be prioritised by the Strategy.
- ✧ The Strategy should commit to long term preventive health research and data collection. Evaluation and performance monitoring should be embedded in all preventive health planning and service delivery.
- ✧ The introduction of genomics in health care to support prevention should be part of a strategic, holistic and inter-governmental approach, with ethical issues resolved and in a way that ensures equality.
- ✧ The Strategy should recognise the opportunities that technology and data provide to enhance prevention, whilst also addressing concerns around data privacy, ethical conduct, and social responsibility.