GLOBAL SELF-CARE FEDERATION

POLICY PAPER

How Self-Care Supports a Life Course Approach to Oral Health

Focusing on Prevention & Health Literacy

November 2024



Contents

3 The Importance of Oral Health for Overall Health and Wellbeing

4 Renewed Attention on Oral Health by the International Community Includes Self-Care Interventions

7 The Role of Self-Care in Oral Health: Focusing on Prevention

9 Alleviating the Burden of Emergency Dental Care by Encouraging Good Oral Health Habits





Global Self Care Federation (GSCF) Oral Health Advisory Group

1 The Importance of Oral Health for Overall Health and Wellbeing

Oral health, often referred to as the

"mirror to the body"[1]

is a key indicator of overall health and wellbeing.



Poor oral health not only leads to discomfort and pain, it also increases the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.[2] **Self-care practices - including regular brushing, flossing, rinsing, tongue cleaning, adopting a balanced diet and avoiding or quitting tobacco use- have a positive impact not only on oral health, but also on overall health and wellbeing.** By incorporating these habits into their daily routines, individuals can prevent common oral health problems and maintain optimal oral hygiene between dental visits.[3]

[1][2][3] Oral Health Worldwide. A report by FDI World Dental Federation. 2015. Available at: www.fdiworlddental.org (link)

The first of a series of GSCF policy briefs, **this brief will highlight the importance of self-care in oral health management and suggest policy recommendations to promote and support self-care practices in oral health**. By elevating the role of self-care in oral health, policymakers can implement strategies that take into account the needs of different populations at different points in their life. These policies can contribute to improving not only oral health but overall health and wellbeing.



2 Renewed Attention on Oral Health by the International Community Includes Self-Care Interventions



DEFINING ORAL HEALTH SELF-CARE

Oral health self-care refers to the **daily behaviours, routines, and products people can adopt to improve and maintain their oral health, as an integral part of their overall health and wellbeing**. Reducing the risk of chronic disease associated with poor oral health and improving quality of life by enabling people to speak, smile, taste, touch, chew, swallow and convey a range of emotions with confidence. Through the adoption of good oral health self-care practices, such as oral hygiene, the most prevalent oral diseases are largely preventable.

Source: GSCF Oral Health Advisory Group



Globally, oral health issues remain a significant public health concern, affecting billions of people across all age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), **oral diseases affect nearly half of the world's population**, with untreated dental caries (tooth decay) being the most prevalent condition. Furthermore, periodontal (gum) diseases, oral cancers, and oral manifestations of systemic diseases contribute to the global burden of oral health conditions – with over 3 billion people having untreated tooth decay affecting primary (milk) and permanent teeth and 19% of adults having severe gum disease.[4] [5] [6]

It was estimated that in 2015, **the cost of missed workdays and reduced productivity that resulted from an oral health condition reached $188 billion**.[7] As an example, tooth pain and trips to the dentist to treat cavities can cause children to miss up to three days of school per year – on average, over 34 million school hours in the US alone are lost each year because of emergency dental care.[8]

The Oral Health Resolution adopted in 2021 at the World Health Assembly highlights the link between oral health and NCDs, as they share common risk factors including tobacco, harmful alcohol use, high sugar intake and lack of physical activity.[9] This link will be highlighted further in the process leading to the Fourth High-level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on the prevention and control of NCDs in September 2025. This upcoming global milestone is an opportunity to foster multistakeholder input, notably from private sector actors, to make a stronger link between the role of oral care in NCD prevention and accelerate Universal Health Coverage globally.



[4] Oral Health Overview. World Health Organization. 2024. Available at: www.who.int (link)

[5] Oral Health Worldwide. A report by FDI World Dental Federation. 2015. Available at: www.fdiworlddental.org (link)

[6] Oral Health Key Facts. World Health Organization. 14 March 2023. Available at: Oral health (who.int) (link)

[7] Follow-up to the political declaration of the third high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the prevention and control of non-communicable disease. 27 April 2022. World Health Organization. Available at: apps.who.int (link)

[8] Health and Economic Benefits of Oral Health Interventions. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 21 December 2022. Available at: www.cdc.gov (link)

[9] Oral Health Resolution. World Health Assembly. 31 May 2021. Available at: apps.who.int (link)

Similar to other NCDs, disease prevention is the cornerstone of any oral health program. The Global Strategy and Action Plan on Oral Health 2023-2030, adopted in 2024, underlines the importance of self-care for oral health in various areas, such as oral health education, access to fluoride toothpaste, and early detection programs among the most efficient interventions for oral health. In particular, the plan recommends brushing teeth with fluoride toothpaste twice a day to maintain good oral health and hygiene – an intervention that falls under the scope of self-care.[20]

OUR ASKS FOR THE FOURTH HIGH-LEVEL MEETING OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF NCDS IN 2025:



1

For member states to affirm the importance of action to reduce the prevalence of oral diseases globally within the context of NCDs.



2

For the bidirectional link between periodontal disease and NCDs, such as diabetes mellitus, to be recognized within the Political Declaration as a key area for action.[10]



3

For the importance of oral health self-care to be recognized for its vital role in reducing incidence of periodontal disease within the context of NCDs.

Despite most oral health conditions being largely preventable and oral health receiving renewed attention from the international community, several challenges hinder efforts to maintain optimal oral health. Challenges include access to dental care, low levels of health literacy, and increasing constraints within health systems and the health workforce.[11]

[20] Antiseptic mouth rinses: an update on comparative effectiveness, risks and recommendations. American Dental Hygienists' Association. February 2013. Available at: jdh.adha.org (link).

[10] Bidirectional association between periodontal disease and diabetes mellitus: a systematic review and meta- analysis of cohort studies. National Centre for Biotechnology Information. 1 July 2021. Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov (link)

[11] After Many Missed Opportunities, Oral Health Gets Long Overdue Attention from WHO. Health Policy Watch. 6 March 2022. Available at: healthpolicy-watch.news (link)

3 The Role of Self-Care in Oral Health: Focusing on Prevention

Self-care in oral health refers to the **proactive measures individuals take to maintain the health and hygiene of their mouths** without the direct intervention of healthcare professionals.



It encompasses a range of practices aimed at preventing oral diseases, promoting oral hygiene, and preserving overall oral health. The World Dental Federation (FDI) recommends brushing for two minutes, twice a day in order to help remove food and plaque and to use a fluoride toothpaste to better prevent tooth decay. Other self-care interventions include not rinsing with water straight after brushing to preserve the protective fluoride, flossing at least once a day, and the use of fluoride mouthwash when brushing is not possible.[12] By adopting regular self-care practices, individuals can significantly reduce their risk of developing common oral health problems such as cavities and periodontal gum disease – this also includes adopting a healthy diet that is low in sugar.[13]

[12] How to practice good oral hygiene. FDI World Dental Federation. Accessed November 2024. Available at: www.fdiworlddental.org (link)

[13] Now is the time to take gum disease seriously. Economist Impact. 2023. Available at: impact.economist.com (link)

With prevention playing such a crucial role in oral health, a life-course approach is particularly important, which takes a time and societal perspective on individual health and well-being through different stages of life and generations. Recent studies have shown the relationship between poor oral health and an increased risk of stroke, diabetes mellitus, and even Alzheimer's Disease, illustrating that oral health is a central component of healthy aging.[14] [15] [16] A 2021 study demonstrated the link between unpleasant dental care experiences during childhood being associated with poor oral health later in life, demonstrating that building confidence in dental care facilities, but also developing good oral health self-care habits is primordial.[17]

EVIDENCE BASED PREVENTION AT COUNTRY-LEVEL – "FIT FOR SCHOOL" PROGRAM

The "Fit for School Approach" integrates three evidence-based prevention measures for the most prevalent childhood diseases: soil-transmitted intestinal worm infections, hygiene-related diseases such as diarrhea and respiratory infections, and rampant tooth decay.[18] The program is implemented by the Ministries of Education in three Southeast Asian countries, and its positive impact on the prevention of dental caries in children was recently documented.[19]

The program implements three school health activities run by teachers:



DAILY GROUP HAND WASHING WITH SOAP



DAILY GROUP TOOTH BRUSHING WITH FLUORIDE TOOTHPASTE



BIANNUAL DEWORMING ACCORDING TO WHO GUIDELINES

[14] Poor oral health may contribute to declines in brain health. American Heart Association. 2 February 2023. Available at: newsroom.heart.org (link)

[15] Oral Health for healthy ageing. The Lancet, Health Longevity. August 2021. Available at: www.thelancet.com (link)

[16] Poor Oral Health Linked with Higher Risk for Alzheimer's Disease. National Library of Medicine. 7 November 2023. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.go (link)

[17] Oral health and healthy ageing: a scoping review. BMC Geriatrics. 8 January 2024. Available at: bmcgeriatr.biomedcentral.com (link)

[18] Oral Health Worldwide. A report by FDI World Dental Federation. 2015. Available at: www.fdiworlddental.org (link)

[19] 'Fit for school' – a school-based water, sanitation and hygiene programme to improve child health: Results from a longitudinal study in Cambodia, Indonesia and Lao PDR. BMC Public Health. 5 April 2017. Available at: bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com (link)

By emphasizing the importance of self-care in oral health, individuals can **take proactive steps to preserve their oral health and reduce their risk of increased oral health complications** but also of other NCDs later in life.

4 Alleviating the Burden of Emergency Dental Care by Encouraging Good Oral Health Habits



Promoting self-care in oral health management leads to a multitude of benefits, foremost among them being improved oral health outcomes.

By adopting regular self-care practices such as brushing, flossing, rinsing,[20] avoiding or quitting tobacco use and maintaining a healthy diet, individuals can significantly reduce their risk of developing oral diseases such as dental caries, periodontal diseases, and oral infections.

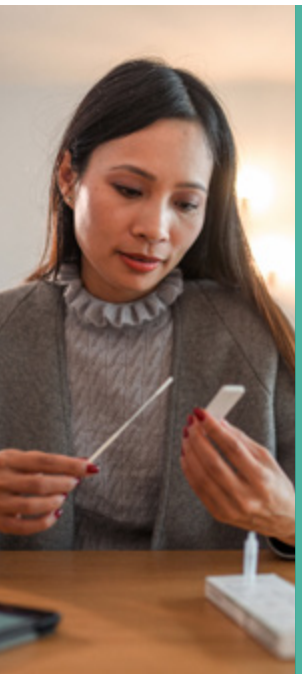
Consistent self-care not only helps prevent oral health problems but also contributes to healthier teeth and gums, resulting in better overall oral hygiene and a reduced need for invasive dental treatments. The Global Strategy and Action Plan on Oral Health 2023-2030 explicitly cites the need to "include oral health in broader health communication, health education and literacy campaigns to raise awareness and empower people for prevention through self-care, oral hygiene and early detection of oral diseases", and to "support all people to achieve their full potential for oral health self-care".[21]

[20] Antiseptic mouth rinses: an update on comparative effectiveness, risks and recommendations. American Dental Hygienists' Association. February 2013. Available at: jdh.adha.org (link).

[21] Global strategy and action plan on oral health (2023–2030). World Health Organization. 24 May 2024. Available at: www.who.int (link)

Dental care is typically not encompassed within basic health insurance plans in many countries, necessitating individuals to bear the expenses either through personal payments or by opting for supplementary dental insurance coverage.[22] [23] Encouraging self-care practices can alleviate the burden on healthcare systems by preventing avoidable oral health issues and reducing the demand for dental care services – while pushing for oral health to be a full part of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) packages, to ensure that people but also policymakers consider dental care as an integral part of overall health and prioritize it.

By promoting self-care and empowering individuals to take responsibility for their oral health, policymakers can mitigate the strain on healthcare resources and allocate them more efficiently to address other pressing healthcare needs. Moreover, empowered individuals are more likely to prioritize preventive measures, seek timely dental care, and adhere to recommended self-care practices. Investing in preventive measures and promoting self-care practices in oral health therefore represents an effective way to preserve healthcare resources and to improve health outcomes for individuals.



THE INCREASING POTENTIAL OF THE MOUTH IN SELF-TESTING

The mouth plays an important role in self-diagnosis, as many self-test tools use saliva to detect an increasing range of medical conditions, including COVID-19 but also HIV, viral hepatitis A, B, and C with potential new applications to detect breast cancer and diabetes type 2.[24] [25] [26] **Using saliva makes diagnostics less invasive** – for example, research has shown that using saliva to self-monitor glucose levels instead of blood is a reliable method for monitoring diabetes that does not require the use of invasive and often painful needles.[27] [28] **Good oral health contributes to ensuring that people feel comfortable and confident to use such tools, and there is uptake for self-testing tools**.

[22] Universal health coverage cannot be universal without oral health. The Lancet, Public Health. 11 December 2022. Available at: www.thelancet.com (link)

[23] Poor dental health costs employers $54 billion a year. Here's how to fix it. World Economic Forum. 20 March 2022. Available at: www.weforum.org (link)

[24] Salivary diagnostics: enhancing disease detection and making medicine better. National Library of Medicine. February 2008. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov (link)

[25] Hand-held biosensor makes breast cancer screening fast, affordable, and accurate. ScienceDaily. 13 February 2024. Available at: www.sciencedaily.com (link)

[26] Salivary glucose measurement: a holy ground for next generation of non-invasive diabetic monitoring. ScienceDirect. August 2023. Available at: www.sciencedirect.com (link)

[27] Salivary glucose measurement: a holy ground for next generation of non-invasive diabetic monitoring. ScienceDirect. August 2023. Available at: www.sciencedirect.com (link)

[28] Saliva diagnostic utility in patients with type 2 diabetes: Future standard method. National Library of Medicine. 23 January 2020. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov (link)

Policy Recommendations:

Building on the WHO Oral Health Resolution and the Global strategy and action plan on oral health 2023–2030 to elevate the benefits of self-care in oral health globally

The following policy recommendations can ensure that self-care supports better oral health outcomes and is leveraged accordingly through oral health interventions at country-level:

- **Supporting research and collating data and evidence relating to oral health self-care;**
- **Implementing educational campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of self-care practices in oral health, in particular brushing, flossing and rinsing, into school curricula and community health programs;**
- **Improving health literacy for oral health and self-care, with the goal to reduce the need for emergency dental care for avoidable oral conditions;**
- **Adopting a life-course approach to oral health, recognizing that addressing the common risk factors between oral diseases and other NCDs, including tobacco use, unhealthy diet, excessive alcohol intake, and lack of physical activity would benefit from a self-care approach to overall health and wellbeing;**
- **Providing incentives for healthcare providers to promote preventive dental care and self- care practices during routine check-ups;**
- **Highlighting the importance of good oral health in the uptake of self-care diagnostics that use saliva.**

Building on the WHO Resolution on Oral Health, a WHO Resolution on Self-Care should emphasize **the need to consider oral health as an integral part of overall health**. This resolution would provide a framework for self-care's integration into national health systems by emphasizing the importance of self-care habits in maintaining good oral health and health and wellbeing more broadly. Such a resolution can promote awareness and political commitment, and mobilize resources for evidence-based interventions – and pave the way for achieving UHC.

GLOBAL SELF-CARE FEDERATION



About GSCF

The Global Self-Care Federation is dedicated to a world where self-care increasingly contributes to better health and more sustainable healthcare systems. We represent associations and manufacturers in the self-care industry, working closely with our members and relevant stakeholder groups to ensure evidence-based self-care products and solutions are recognized as key contributors to health for individuals and systems worldwide.

www.selfcarefederation.org