

20 March 2026

Media release

Water-only schools key to cutting child tooth decay, says Dental Association

Mandating all schools to adopt water-only policies this World Oral Health Day (20 March) would be a practical step to curb the rising rates of tooth decay among children.

The NZ Dental Association (NZDA) says New Zealand's high intake of sugary drinks among young people continues to have visible consequences in clinics and hospitals.

Fizzy drinks remain a leading contributor to excess sugar consumption in children's diets, with frequent intake linked directly to dental decay and broader health issues.

Schools are a critical place to intervene and without clear requirements, access to sugary drinks remains inconsistent, undermining efforts to reduce harm early in life.

The scale of the issue is significant, NZDA Colgate Oral Health Promotion Manager Anishma Ram says.

Tooth decay remains common in young children with 41.7 per cent of five-year-olds having experienced decay, a figure largely unchanged from 2014, according to the Ministry of Health.

Ram says the focus needs to shift from treatment to prevention.

"We know what's driving a lot of this harm. Sugary drinks are a big part of it, and they're everywhere.

"If we make water the norm throughout all schools, it helps reset what kids see as a normal choice day to day."

Normalising drinking water during school hours would reinforce healthier habits without adding cost or complexity for schools, Ram says.

The Association is urging the Government to act now, framing water-only policies as a straightforward public health measure with long-term benefits.

Establishing a consistent national standard, Ram says, would reduce preventable harm and ease pressure on the health system.

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