

New Zealand Dental Association

Report Card

2026

The 2026 Oral Health Report Card
Key Oral Health Measures

Tracking
progress
towards
improving
Kiwis' oral
health



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of The 2026 Oral
Health Report Card



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Dental Assoc.**

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Foreword

Welcome to our 2026 Oral Health Report Card

Almost all of the problems dentists treat on a day-to-day basis in New Zealand are preventable.

Tooth decay, gum disease and oral cancer are among the most common noncommunicable diseases worldwide and have a severe and significant health, societal, and economic impacts. Unfortunately, you see it in every age group: kids coming in with cavities that education, water fluoridation, in-office preventive care, and decent policy around sugary drinks might have helped to prevent. Adults needing teeth to be extracted due to decay that started in their early 20s, because they could not afford to go to the dentist, is not uncommon.

It's the central frustration of the profession, and it's the reason this report card exists. Recent governments have done very little to address oral health inequalities and inequity in New Zealand. It always seems to get put in the 'too hard basket'. That's not a partisan point; it's just a fact, because it involves time and funding to address.

The scoring in this report card reflects where things actually stand currently for: children, young adults, older New Zealanders, and people with disabilities. Each group has well-understood needs, and the system isn't meeting them. In some cases, it never has. The green, amber, and red scores in this report represent an honest assessment of how wide those gaps have become.

What makes it frustrating is the economics. Prevention is cheap while treatment isn't. When we don't invest in preventative measures like water fluoridation, nutrition policies, and education, and then we compound that lack of action with little to no oral health funding for those who need it in early adulthood, we end up spending significantly more to treat disease further down the track.

We defer costs, and they come back to bite us. A filling (to fix a cavity when it is found early) is far cheaper than a root

canal down the track. But none of those bills accounts for the psychosocial cost, the time off work from pain, the shame of missing a front tooth, or the effect on someone's overall health. Families absorb costs the public system should be sharing, and yet most of this doesn't have to happen.

We need to have a clear plan that is focused on prevention, and clear government policy to support that plan.

Health NZ, with the support of the Minister of Health, have commissioned a review of dental care for children and adolescents aged 0-17 years. It is a start and we are pleased to support it, but oral health is about more than children and adolescents. It is important to prevent, diagnose and treat dental disease early; that means making sure everyone has access to quality oral health care and funding for those groups that are most vulnerable and most in need.

We also need to focus on the issues through all the ages and stages of life. To date the political will to address it has been lacklustre.

We have put this report card together because the profession has a responsibility to say clearly when things aren't good enough.

What we're asking for isn't extraordinary, we just want a proper plan, real investment, and oral health treated as part of general health.

The Government needs to come to the party, and we're helping to keep them accountable.



Dr Dave Excell, President
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2026 Oral Health Report Card:
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New Zealand Dental Association

Report Card

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Queries and Comments

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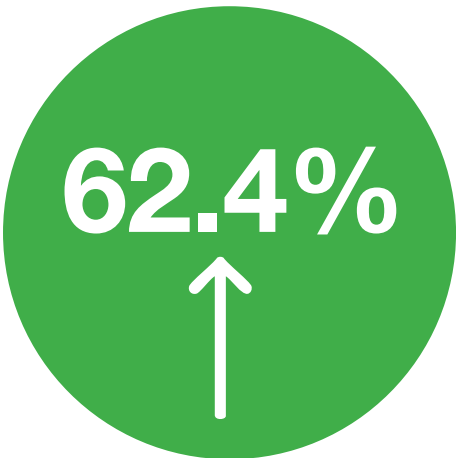


At a Glance

Key Oral Health Measures 2026

These seven key oral health measures provide headline indicators about oral health, prevention of oral disease, access to oral health services, and the capacity of the oral health workforce.

The full suite of measures aligned with the priorities for improving oral health outlined in the NZDA Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health 2025–2030, are provided in the following section of this NZDA Report Card 2026.

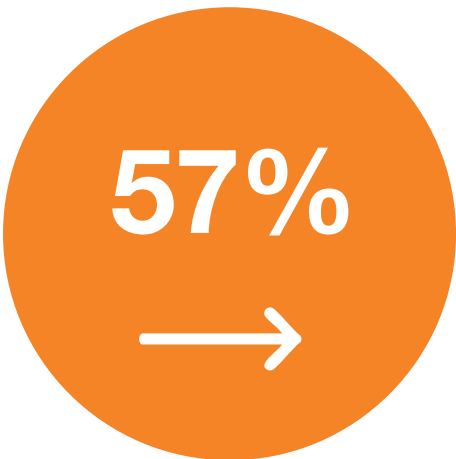


62.4%

↑

Proportion of NZ population receiving optimally fluoridated water

Following directives issued to fourteen water suppliers in July 2022, the proportion of the population receiving fluoridated water is estimated to have increased from 50.7% to 62.4%.



57%

→

Proportion of 5-year-old children with no primary teeth decayed (2024)

There has been little change in this measure over the past 25 years.



76.9%

↓

Adults self-rated oral health as excellent, very good, or good

This represents a decrease from 79.5% in 2017/18 and is statistically lower than in 2019/20.

75.1%



Children under 15 years that visited a dental health care worker in past 12 months

From 2014/15 to 2024/25, the proportion of children reported by parents to have visited a dental health care worker in the previous 12 months declined significantly, from 84.4% to 75.1%

4,503



Number of children on the public hospital waiting list for dental care in October 2025

The number of children on the waiting list for dental care decreased from 5,613 in October 2024 to 4,503 in October 2025. Over the same period, public hospital discharges increased from 898 per month to 1,005 per month. However, the number of adults on the public hospital waiting list for dental care declined only marginally, from 1,348 to 1,274.

43%



Adults reporting unmet dental needs due to cost

The New Zealand Health Survey 2024/25 estimated that 1,775,000 people experienced unmet dental care needs due to financial barriers in the previous 12 months. Despite increased investment in dental needs grants in 2022 and higher uptake, the reach of the scheme remains limited relative to the scale of unmet need. Current estimates indicate that the scheme reaches only around 4.7% of adults reporting unmet dental care needs due to cost.

53



Number of full time equivalent dentists per 100,000 population

The national average obscures significant regional variation. In 85% of former district health board areas, dentist workforce levels were at or below 45 full-time equivalents (FTEs) per 100,000 adults.

2026 Oral Health Report Card – Full Report Table

Indicator	Measure	Progress Status
Oral Health Promotion and Prevention		
% of NZ population receiving optimally fluoridated water	62.40%	↑
5-year-old children decay free and number of decayed missing or filled teeth	57.3%; 2.01 teeth	→
Year 8 caries free and dmft	67.85%; 0.75 teeth	→
Children under 15 years toothbrushing twice a day or more with fluoride toothpaste	62.9%	→
Adults self rated oral health – excellent v good or good	76.9%	↓
Adults toothbrushing twice a day or more with fluoride toothpaste	66.2%	→
Access to Care – children under 15 years		
% children (0–12/13y) overdue for scheduled care	33.6%	↑
% teens Y9 to 17 years accessing care	70%	↑
Teenagers seen by contracting dental practices v COHS (Child and Adolescent Services)	97% v 3%	→
Children under 15 years with teeth removed due to decay in the past 12 months	3.4%	→
Children under 15 years with teeth removed due to decay in lifetime	9.8%	→
Number of public hospital discharges per month for dental care for children under 15 years	1,005	↑
Number of children under 15 years on the public hospital waiting list for dental care	4,503	↓
Children under 15 years with unmet need for dental care due to cost	3.0%	→
Children under 15 years that visited a dental health care worker visit in past 12 months	75.1%	↓
Access to Care – adults		
Teeth removed due to decay in last 12 months	7.5%	→
All teeth removed due to decay	4.9%	↓

See over for continued table

Report Card

■ Of Concern
 ■ Not Improving
 ■ Within Target

Indicator	Measure	Progress Status
Access to Care – adults (continued)		
Dental health care worker visit in past 12 months	48.3%	→
Only visit dental health care worker for dental problems	51.2%	↓
Unmet need for dental care due to cost	43.0%	→
WINZ Dental needs grant expenditure and volumes	\$5.7M per month; 7,875 grants	→
Practices with an appointment on Monday	62%	No previous data
Practices taking on new patients	93%	No previous data
Number of public hospital discharges per month for dental care for adults	186	→
Number of people on the public hospital waiting list for dental care (adults)	1274	→
New claims for dental injuries	40,546	→
Workforce		
FTE dentists per 100,000 population aged 15 years and over	53	↓
FTE Oral Health Therapists per 100,000 population aged 0-14 years	81	↑
Private dental sector dentist workforce vacancies	19%	No previous data
Public oral health workforce vacancies – dentists and dental specialists	15.6%	→
Public oral health workforce vacancies – OHTs	9.5%	→
Number of NZ government funded student places in dentistry per annum	60	→
Research		
\$ available for funding dental and oral health research from the NZDRF Trust	\$241,811	↑
\$ available for funding oral health research from the HNZ/MOH contract	\$149,166	→