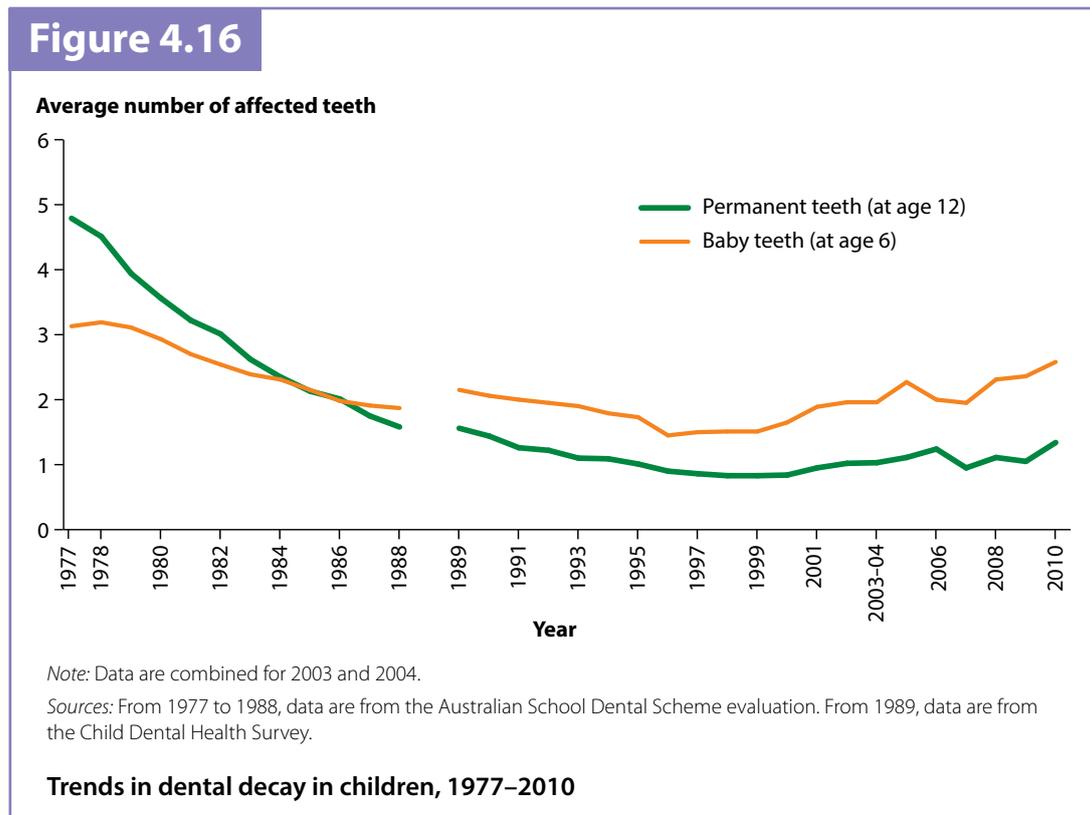


4.13 Oral health

On the whole, oral health has improved in Australia over recent decades, particularly in response to fluoride being added to water supplies from the 1950s. Recent trends, however, suggest that changes in diet and behaviour—such as increased consumption of bottled water, sports drinks and soft drinks—may be having some negative impacts on oral health.

What is the condition of our teeth?

Poor childhood oral health is a strong predictor of poor adult oral health. After falling steadily since the 1970s, rates of tooth decay in children slowly rose from the late 1990s onwards (Figure 4.16).



Data from examination of children's teeth at public dental clinics in 6 Australian states and territories showed that, in 2010:

- more than half of children aged 6 had experienced decay in their baby teeth
- almost half of children aged 12 had experienced decay in their permanent teeth
- on average, every child aged 15 had at least 1 filled permanent tooth, and at least 1 other with untreated decay.

Adult oral health has improved over time, though at a slower rate than in children.

- From 1994 to 2010, of those adults who visited the dentist, the number who received a filling fell from 5 in 10 to 4 in 10.
- Between 1994 and 2010, both the proportion of adults who had visited a dentist with a problem in the last year, and those who had visited for a check-up (not a problem), increased, from 56% to 62% and from 48% to 61% respectively. (People who have regular check-ups generally have fewer extractions and fillings.)
- From 1999 to 2010, adults reporting 'fair' or 'poor' oral health fell from 1 in 4 to less than 1 in 5.
- Despite these improvements, in 2005 more than 90% of adults had some history of decay in their permanent teeth.
- In 2010, about 12% of adults had fewer than 21 natural teeth remaining and more than 20% had severe gum disease.
- In 2010–11, the rate of hospitalisations for dental conditions which could have been avoided if the patient had received timely and adequate non-hospital care was highest for children aged 5–9 and lowest for adults aged 25–34. The highest rates were in *Very remote* areas and the lowest in *Major cities*.

Australia's oral health system

- In 2011–12, spending on dental services (\$8.3 billion) was 6.3% of total health spending. This was the lowest share of the total in 10 years.
- Around half of all people aged 5 and over had some level of private dental cover in 2010. The majority of adults with insurance reported that their insurance paid some (79%) or all (8%) of the dental costs of their last visit. Only 9% of insured adults paid all their own dental expenses.
- In 2012, for every 100,000 people there were about 57 dentists, 4 dental therapists, 5 dental hygienists, 3 oral health therapists and 5 dental prosthetists (full-time equivalent rates).
- The highest number of employed dentists was in *Major cities* and the lowest in *Remote* and *Very remote* areas.

What is missing from the picture?

There is a lack of routinely collected dental service use data in Australia. Some data are collected from public dental services; however, governments fund less than 30% of total dental services expenditure. Public dental service data are also not necessarily representative, due to variation between jurisdictions in the scope and coverage of public dental programs.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on oral health in Australia is available on the AIHW website at [Dental and oral health](#). The reports [Adult oral health and dental visiting in Australia: results from the National Dental Telephone Interview Survey 2010](#), [Health expenditure Australia 2011–12](#), and [Dental workforce 2012](#) are available for free download.

More information is also available at the [Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health](#) website, the Australian Government [Department of Health](#) website and at [National Oral Health Plan](#).