
For Information

REPORT TITLE: The Oral Health System – A Picture in Peel

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OBJECTIVE

To provide an overview of the oral health system and the oral health programming available to Peel residents.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- Oral health is a key part of overall health with dental diseases being largely preventable.
 - Low-income Peel residents rank their oral health as only fair or poor. These, as well as seniors and recent immigrants, are less likely to regularly visit a dental provider.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic response may have further worsened the oral health of Peel residents, unequally affecting those in the greatest need of care.
 - Peel Public Health offers a multipronged, health equity focused approach at both the population and individual levels to improve the oral health of Peel residents.
 - By 2025, it is estimated that all uninsured low- and middle-income Canadians will be able to benefit from a federal program that will help increase access to dental care.
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DISCUSSION

1. Background

Good oral health is an important component of one's overall health and quality of life. Oral health issues can cause pain and infection, as well as physical, social, and psychological consequences. Poor oral health has been linked with other health outcomes, such as diabetes, heart disease, and respiratory disorders. Dental diseases are largely preventable through better nutrition, oral hygiene, and regular visits to a dental professional. Dental health outcomes are also influenced by social determinants of health.

Oral Health in Canada and Ontario

Historically in Canada, apart from some in-hospital surgical dental services, oral health care has not been covered under a national insured healthcare framework. As a result, not all individuals have easy access to an oral health care provider.

In Ontario, routine dental care is not covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) and, therefore residents rely on private insurance, self pay, or available public programs for accessing dental care. Lack of insurance or limited dental benefits can make obtaining dental care costly, leading to inadequate oral health care and potential negative health outcomes.

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2. Oral Health in Peel

- In 2013/2014, 15 per cent of Peel residents aged 12 years and older rated their oral health as only fair or poor. In 2007/2008, 20 per cent of Peel residents (aged 12 years and older) with a low-middle income reported their oral health status as only fair or poor; these individuals also reported having a harder time paying for care.
- In 2009/2010, 30 per cent of Peel residents may not have visited a dental provider within the past year, with vulnerable groups like seniors, recent immigrants, and low-income individuals being among those who were significantly less likely to do so.
- In 2009/2010, nine per cent of Peel residents experienced recent tooth decay, abscess, tooth fracture, damaged fillings, and/or infected gums. In 2018/2019, 37 per cent of screened Peel students in junior kindergarten, senior kindergarten, and Grade 2 had at least one or more decayed, missing, or filled teeth.

As a result, many residents visit emergency departments and physicians to seek dental care, resulting in an estimated \$4 million in avoidable annual costs to Peel's health care system.

3. Oral Health Programs and Services in Peel

Role of Public Health

The *Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services and Accountability (OPHS)* identify the minimum expectations for public health programs and services to be provided by boards of health. To achieve the Ontario Public Health Standards program outcomes, Peel Public Health's oral health programs provide detection, prevention, and health care access and navigation services to improve the oral health of its residents. These programs provide a multipronged, health equity focused approach to help those who are most vulnerable both at the population and individual level. This is promoted at the population level through community water fluoridation, school screening, and health promotion initiatives. At the individual level, good oral health is addressed by offering preventive and routine care services at dental clinics, facilitating access to emergency care, and encouraging regular visits to an oral health professional.

The most effective approach to promoting good health is disease prevention which also helps reduce healthcare costs. Oral Health programs provide three levels of prevention in public health – primary, secondary, and tertiary:

- **Primary** – Promoting healthy oral health behaviours and improving oral health outcomes through community water fluoridation and preventive dental services.
- **Secondary** – Detecting early disease and oral health needs in a target population such as elementary school children through screening.
- **Tertiary** - Reducing the effects of established disease in individuals by providing routine dental care such as fillings and extractions to eligible Peel children and seniors.

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Programs and Services

Public Health Units are mandated by the province to offer oral health programs serving vulnerable groups to fill the gap in oral health care coverage at the national and provincial levels. In addition to providing ongoing advocacy for better dental care access, Peel Public Health works closely with private dental care providers and Community Health Centres to support eligible children (≤17 years of age) via the Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) program and seniors (65+ years of age) via the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program (OSDCP) (see related reports listed on the April 27, 2023 Regional Council agenda titled “Children’s Oral Health – Public Health Program and Service Update” and “Senior’s Oral Health – Public Health Program and Service Update”, respectively).

Table 1: Oral health programming serving vulnerable groups in Peel

Level	Program and Service Area	Health Equity/Targeted Approach	Population Group Benefited
Population	Community water fluoridation	Safe and effective universal measure for preventing tooth decay	All Peel residents
	Providing free dental screenings to children in elementary schools and in the community to identify oral health needs	Prioritizing screening of high needs elementary schools during the school year	All Peel children ≤17 years of age
	Oral health promotion campaigns encouraging regular tooth brushing, flossing, healthy eating, and water consumption	Targeted oral health promotion campaigns in areas of highest need	All Peel residents
Individual	Providing preventive and routine care to all eligible low-income children through HSO	Delivering services in the community using the dental bus and portable clinics	Eligible Peel children ≤17 years of age
	Facilitating access to emergency and routine oral health care for eligible low-income children through HSO	Providing support to children with urgent needs to navigate and access oral health care through HSO	Eligible Peel children ≤17 years of age
	Providing dental care through local Community Health Centres for seniors who are eligible for the OSDCP	Providing treatment to seniors who meet the income threshold and lack private dental insurance or benefits.	Eligible Peel seniors 65+ years of age

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4. COVID-19 Impact on Oral Health

During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to dental care was reduced due to dental office closures and increased infection prevention measures. The children's oral health program was paused as most staff were redeployed to support the COVID-19 response with eligible children still having access to dental treatment via HSO. In 2019, the newly launched OSDCP was expected to be fully operational. Because of the pandemic response, the program operated at reduced capacity.

With staff gradually returning to their base roles, children's oral health programming began reopening in November 2022. The OSDCP continues to grow in demand as capacity continues to be developed. However, the pandemic may have unequally impacted the oral health of those in greatest need, and the Oral Health team is prioritizing an equitable approach to service delivery to ensure those with the greatest need receive the care they require.

5. Canadian Dental Care Plan

On March 28, 2023, the federal government released its annual budget. \$17.4 billion will be allocated over five years beginning in 2023-2024 to implement the Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP). This will help increase access to dental care for all uninsured low- and middle-income Canadians. Phase 1 of the CDCP, the Canada Dental Benefit, was implemented in December 2022 and is geared towards providing dental care access to eligible children under the age of 12. Phase 2 includes firm timelines to launch the dental care program by the end of this year for lower-income uninsured children under the age of 18 and seniors 65 years and older, and for people with disabilities. Details regarding the impact of the CDCP on public health programming are currently unknown.

6. Conclusion

While most Peel residents have historically perceived their oral health to be good, certain groups such as those of low income, seniors, and recent immigrants struggle to access care, with the COVID-19 pandemic potentially worsening this issue. Peel Public Health continues to implement various programs and services to improve oral health, with a focus on health equity and targeting areas of greatest need. Peel Public Health will continue to leverage provincial and federal dental programs to improve access to care and the oral health of Peel's residents.



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