



# Inspiring health

**An introduction to VicHealth**

(Victorian Health Promotion Foundation)





## Who we are

**The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) is the peak body for health promotion in Victoria. With a focus on promoting good health and wellbeing and preventing ill health, we lead and advocate for excellence in health promoting policies and programs.**

Our health promotion investments target the greatest preventable risk factors for ill health and chronic disease: smoking, alcohol misuse, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, social exclusion, discrimination, violence and UV exposure.

In particular, VicHealth seeks to influence those things that determine individual health outcomes that can be changed, related to non-communicable diseases (eg, heart disease, cancer, anxiety and depression) and that are aligned with national and state health priorities.

One of our strengths is our ability to work across a wide range of government portfolios, community sectors and organisations to promote the social and behavioural changes we need to support health and wellbeing.

We are known for the way we bring disparate parties together to develop innovative solutions to the underlying causes of ill health. All of our activity is underpinned by high quality health promotion research and rigorous evaluation.

Our organisation represents a ground-breaking model for funding of health promotion programs, and maintains a leading position worldwide.

**VicHealth's focus is on health promotion and primary prevention of non-communicable diseases.**





## About us

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) is a statutory authority established by the Victorian Parliament in accordance with the *Tobacco Act 1987*. It has a mandate to promote good health for all Victorians.

### Our vision

VicHealth envisages a community where:

- health is a fundamental human right
- everyone shares in the responsibility for promoting health
- everyone benefits from improved health outcomes.

### Our mission

Our mission is to build the capabilities of organisations, communities and individuals in ways that:

- change social, economic, cultural and physical environments to improve health for all Victorians
- strengthen the understanding and the skills of individuals in ways that support their efforts to achieve and maintain health.



# The role of health promotion in reducing the incidence of disease and illness

**Effective health promotion has the capacity to improve health, reduce the costs of treating chronic disease, enhance economic productivity, bridge the health divide between population groups, and add healthy years to life expectancy.**

Chronic disease represents one of the largest challenges facing the Australian health system. It is estimated to cause about 80 per cent of the total burden of disease in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

The major chronic diseases can be prevented by reducing unhealthy behaviours and risk factors, including unhealthy eating, physical inactivity, risky alcohol use and smoking. These behaviours are nested within a broader social context.

Poverty, social isolation, poor quality housing and social infrastructure, low levels of education and literacy, violence, discrimination, heavy exposure to marketing of ‘unhealthy products’, and poor urban design are all factors that impact on people’s ability to live a healthy lifestyle.

Preventing chronic disease requires coordinated action to promote the creation of healthier environments, and encouragement of individuals to undertake healthier behaviours.



<sup>1</sup> AIHW 2006. *Chronic diseases and associated risk factors in Australia, 2006*. Cat. No. PHE 81. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.

## VicHealth's strategic priorities

**VicHealth's programs and projects focus on improving the health of all people in Victoria, while reducing the differences in health status between different population groups.**

**For detailed information about our strategic priorities, go to: [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/strategic](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/strategic)**



### Investing in health promotion knowledge

VicHealth has a long and proud history of investing in public health research and promoting evidence-based interventions to promote the health and wellbeing of the Victorian community.

We derive evidence to support our strategic objectives by reviewing existing research and evaluation, funding external research, and implementing our own research and evaluation.

Effective knowledge is borne from meaningful collaboration and partnerships. Whether those partners are service providers, researchers, policy makers, government, community organisations or private industry, we invest in partnerships to facilitate sustainable advocacy, policy and structural change to benefit health promotion and public health.

In addition, we work to ensure data, research and evaluation materials are widely disseminated and easy to access.

### Reducing health inequalities

Health inequalities result when people lack access to the things we all need for good health, such as income, education, housing, and good living and working conditions. Access to these resources is largely beyond an individual's control.

Victorians who are most likely to experience health inequalities include people from lower socioeconomic groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally diverse communities, and people with disabilities.

VicHealth recognises that the social and economic conditions in which people live have a significant influence on their health. That's why our focus is on making changes in society to provide all people with the opportunity to live a healthy life. Sometimes this involves working directly with priority populations, and other times focusing on the broader conditions in which they grow, live, work and age.





## Reducing smoking

VicHealth was set up specifically to reduce tobacco harm and has been investing in this area for 25 years. As well as funding cessation programs, we are involved in legal and regulatory reform and are at the forefront of research, advocacy and program development in the anti-smoking arena, nationally and internationally.

Tobacco control has been one of the best, if not the best buy in health over the last 30 years. The smoking rate among Victorian adults has reduced considerably; from 34 per cent in 1987 to 14.4 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Disadvantaged groups, however, have consistently higher rates of smoking.

Though much progress has been made, there is still a long way to go before smoking is no longer a major health problem. Smoking costs around 4,000 lives and \$5 billion every year in Victoria<sup>3</sup> and remains the leading preventable cause of many cancers and respiratory, cardiovascular and other diseases.

## Promoting healthy eating

Healthy eating is essential for good physical and mental health. Nutrition-related disease risk factors contribute significantly to Victoria's burden of disease.<sup>4</sup>

Food choice is influenced by multiple factors including the secure and reliable supply of healthy foods, financial and physical access to food, and the cultural environments that either support or inhibit healthy food choices.

VicHealth takes a broad approach to healthy eating and focuses on addressing systemic barriers, which are beyond the control of individuals. We work with key stakeholders to guide policy and regulation development, invest in research to further understand the factors that influence healthy eating, and fund projects that support the development of environments that encourage healthy eating and increase the accessibility, affordability and sustainability of healthy foods.

<sup>2</sup> The Cancer Council Victoria 2011, *Smoking Prevalence and Consumption in Victoria* report, Cancer Council Victoria, Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> The Cancer Council Victoria 2005, *The Tobacco Tragedy: Deaths caused by smoking in Victoria 1999-2002*. The Cancer Council Victoria, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> DHS 2005. *Victorian Burden of Disease Study: Mortality and Morbidity 2001*. Public Health Group, Department of Human Services, State Government of Victoria.

## VicHealth's strategic priorities



### Reducing harm from alcohol

Alcohol-related harm is a significant preventable health issue in Victoria. While the social use of alcohol is widely accepted, alcohol is associated with more than 200 different health problems, including brain damage, liver failure, stroke, cancer and obesity.<sup>5</sup> It also causes a range of social problems that affect the drinker and those around them.

The National Alcohol Strategy notes that 'too many Australians now partake in "drunken" cultures rather than drinking cultures'.<sup>6</sup>

Changing the hazardous drinking culture is a challenging task that requires an innovative approach to tackling the broader social, economic, geographical, historical and economic factors of alcohol consumption.

To this end, VicHealth contributes to debates about alcohol use and supports programs that promote a safer drinking culture. We are strengthening our efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm and induce cultural change – particularly in light of recent evidence showing an increase in extreme binge drinking among young people – by advocating for policy change and regulation, for example, the regulation of alcohol marketing, alcohol taxation reform, and alcohol availability.

### Increasing participation in physical activity

Regular physical activity is ranked second only to tobacco control as the most important factor in preventing chronic disease in Australia.<sup>7</sup> That's why VicHealth encourages people (particularly those who we know are least likely to be active – women, people from lower socioeconomic communities, older adults, people born overseas, people with a disability and Indigenous Australians) to participate in sport and active recreation to improve their health and wellbeing.

Since our inception we have worked with thousands of sporting organisations, ranging from the smallest of community-based clubs to the largest national codes. Our focus is on finding ways to increase participation rates and creating sporting environments that are healthy, safe and inclusive for everyone in our community.

Ensuring that the social and economic determinants of physical inactivity are addressed will help to arrest the increase in sedentary behaviour, reduce the decline in physical activity and promote social connection.

5 Rehm J, Mathers C, Popova, S et al. 2009. 'Global burden of disease and injury and economic costs attributable to alcohol use and alcohol-use disorders'. *The Lancet*, vol. 373, Issue 9682, pp. 2223–2233.

6 Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2006. *National Alcohol Strategy 2006–2009: Towards Safer Drinking Cultures*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

7 Begg S, Vos T, Barker B, Stevenson C, Stanley L & Lopez A 2007. *The burden of disease and injury in Australia 2003*. AIHW Cat. No. PHE 82, Canberra.





### Increasing opportunities for social connection

Social connections comprise the people we know, the friends we confide in, the family we belong to, and the community we live in. Each contributes to our physical and mental health in a variety of ways.

While belonging and being connected and engaged in group and civic activities are intrinsic to good mental health and wellbeing, social isolation is associated with stress, anxiety, depression and increased death rates, particularly from heart disease and stroke.<sup>8,9</sup> People who have good social relationships have a 50 per cent greater likelihood of survival than people with poor social relationships.<sup>10</sup>

For these reasons, VicHealth focuses on strengthening social connections to improve health and wellbeing – both mental and physical. We invest in programs and research that: build people’s skills, self-esteem and ability to connect with others in their community; increase a sense of group belonging and purpose; and encourage people to get involved in their local community and have a voice on important issues.

### Reducing race-based discrimination and supporting cultural diversity

Social cohesion and a ‘fair go’ for all are important for healthy people and communities. Valuing Victoria’s cultural diversity and Aboriginal heritage and making sure our communities and organisations are free from race-based discrimination are key steps in achieving this. Exposure to discrimination is linked with poor health, especially poor mental health.<sup>11</sup>

For these reasons, VicHealth works with the wider community to support cultural diversity and reduce race-based discrimination. We raise awareness of the problem and prevalence of racism, increase knowledge about the damaging health, social and economic impacts of this discrimination, and work with a range of partners to trial new approaches and build skills and knowledge to reduce it.

Our work – which focuses on how we all respond to cultural diversity – complements existing discrimination legislation and other programs that provide direct support to people affected by discrimination and disadvantage.

8 Bunker SJ, Colquhoun DM, Esler MD et al. 2003. ‘Stress’ and coronary heart disease: psychosocial risk factors. National Heart Foundation of Australia position statement update, *MJA* 178(6): 272–276.

9 Barefoot JC, Grønbaek M, Jensen G, Schnohr P & Prescott E 2005 (15 May). ‘Social Network Diversity and Risks of Ischemic Heart Disease and Total Mortality: Findings from the Copenhagen City Heart Study’. *Am. J. Epidemiol.*, 161(10): 960–967, doi: 10.1093/aje/kwi128

10 Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB & Layton JB 2010. ‘Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review’, *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 7, no. 7, pp. 1–20.

11 Paradies Y 2006. ‘A systematic review of empirical research on self reported racism and health’. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, vol 35, pp. 888–901.

## VicHealth's strategic priorities



### Preventing violence against women

Violence against women is more damaging to the health of Victorian women aged 15 to 44 years than any other well-known risk factor, including high blood pressure, obesity and smoking.<sup>12</sup>

VicHealth focuses on preventing violence against women before it occurs by promoting respectful relationships and non-violent cultures within families, organisations and communities.

Our overall violence prevention program draws on evidence to develop and implement interventions aimed at the whole population, as well as interventions in priority settings where harmful attitudes and behaviours are most powerfully formed or supported – or where there is strongest potential to move toward cultures of respect and gender equality. To this end, we work in partnership with government, local councils, community and health services, the sport and recreation sector, workplaces and women's health organisations to make preventing violence against women everyone's business.

Our program of research, community strengthening, organisational development and advocacy is focused on building evidence and promoting best practice in creating more equal and respectful relationships between women and men at every level of society.

### Economic participation

When people are supported, respected, valued and have access to basic resources, they do well at school, in work, with friends, and have improved mental health. Participating in school, work and training enhances health and wellbeing.

VicHealth funds projects designed to increase people's access to these opportunities and improve the quality of working conditions, education and skills through training.

Because workplaces play an important part in building participation, our program and research activity is focused on this setting. While workplaces can nurture and encourage good health they can also cause or contribute to illness and injury. That's why VicHealth has identified areas where workplaces can begin to make advances, not only in improving the health of employees and preventing future problems, but also in enhancing productivity and reducing absenteeism and staff turnover.

<sup>12</sup> VicHealth 2004. *The health costs of violence: measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.



## Creating environments that improve health

Behavioural risk factors for chronic disease are shaped not only by individual preferences but by built, social, natural and economic environments.

An ideal healthy environment includes incentives for people to walk and exercise, safe areas for children to play outside, street-friendly building design that promotes a sense of safety and interaction between neighbours, places for people to come together that are both enjoyable and accessible for everyone, and a good public transport system.

The connection between health – physical, mental and social – and the built environment is being recognised by governments, planners and health experts, particularly as the Victorian population is growing dramatically.

VicHealth works with local and state governments as well as the planning profession to improve urban design so that walking, cycling and use of open public space is encouraged. With this in mind, VicHealth collaborates with a diverse range of partners, including local government, the sport and recreation sector and community organisations to ensure health is factored into our future environments.

## Reducing harmful UV exposure

Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world – at least two in three people will be diagnosed before the age of 70.<sup>13</sup> More than 1,000 Australian are treated for skin cancer every day and over 1,830 Australians die from skin cancer each year. In Victoria alone, 401 people die from skin cancer each year – many more than the annual road toll.<sup>14</sup>

The good news is that skin cancer is one of the most preventable cancers in Australia. That's why VicHealth invests in the SunSmart program. It promotes the balance between the benefits and harms of UV and is one of the longest running and most successful skin cancer prevention programs in the world.

13 Staples M, Elwood M, Burton R, Williams J, Marks R & Giles G 2006. 'Non-melanoma skin cancer in Australia: the 2002 national survey and trends since 1985'. *Medical Journal of Australia*; 184: 6–10.

14 SunSmart Victoria available at: [http://www.sunsmart.com.au/skin\\_cancer](http://www.sunsmart.com.au/skin_cancer)





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