What is chronic disease?

Chronic diseases are complex and varied in terms of their nature, how they are caused and the extent of their impact on the community.

Typically, chronic diseases are long-lasting, and have persistent effects. Chronic diseases can range from mild conditions, such as short-sightedness, dental decay and minor hearing loss, to debilitating arthritis and low back pain, and to life-threatening heart disease and cancers.

How common is chronic disease?
Chronic diseases are the leading cause of illness, disability and death in Australia, accounting for 90% of deaths in 2011. Many people have more than 1 chronic illness or condition at the same time.

Chronic disease programmes and initiatives
Chronic disease is addressed at a national level through a wide range of programmes and initiatives to support treatment and management. Significant funding is also provided to ensure that quality clinical research is conducted into chronic conditions, and to maintain national monitoring and surveillance measures.

Programmes that support chronic disease management and care include:

- The **Medicare Benefits Schedule**, which provides subsidies for patient care and includes Medicare items for the planning and management of chronic and terminal conditions. Eligible patients can also be referred by a GP for up to five Medicare subsidised allied health services that are directly related to the treatment of their chronic condition. In order to encourage early detection, diagnosis and intervention for treatable conditions, health assessment items are also available for people aged 45-49 years who are at risk of developing chronic disease, people aged 75 years and older and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- The **Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme**, which continues to provide subsidies for a range of medicines used in the treatment of, or symptoms associated with chronic diseases.