

OLDER ADULTS

Today's seniors are a shining example of how well preventive dental services and public education works. Because of a sustained preventative approach to oral health, starting when today's Baby Boomers were children, the proportion of persons 65 years of age and older who have lost all their teeth has significantly declined, particularly among elders still living independently. A generation of prevention, regular dental care, and fluoridated water has proven that oral diseases and tooth loss are not inevitable aspects of aging.

However, more can be done to improve oral health care for older adults. The importance of oral health for seniors is particularly overlooked as a matter of public policy. Most people lose their dental insurance coverage when they retire from the workforce. Medicare does not cover routine dental care for older adults, providing a few, very limited services considered to be "medically necessary."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "older persons with the poorest oral health are those who are economically disadvantaged, lack insurance, and are members of racial and ethnic minorities. Being

disabled, homebound, or institutionalized also increases the risk of poor oral health." Seniors who live in nursing homes and other congregate settings have very limited, if any, access to dental care.

Oral health is a key component of an older person's overall general health, well-being, and quality of life. Not only are oral health problems painful, if untreated they can complicate a person's ability to speak, chew, and swallow. Untreated oral health problems result in an inability to eat nutritious foods, weight loss, and an increased susceptibility to infections, all of which impact other systemic health conditions. Oral infections, like all infections, increase an older adult's risk of falling along with accompanying injury, higher rates of confusion, misdiagnosis of pain, and treatment with inappropriate pharmaceuticals such as anti-psychotics. These health problems too often result in the loss of dignity, self-esteem, self-confidence, and a poorer general quality of life.

Improving the oral health care of older adults and their access to dental services should be a priority if we are to build on the progress that began when they were children. ■

Dental care is not included in Medicare.



Oral Health America's "Wisdom Tooth Project" focuses on improving the oral health outcomes of older adults. Visit www.toothwisdom.org to find educational and care resources for older adults and their caregivers, including how aging affects oral health, tips about denture care, and the effective of medications on the mouth.