



A Healthy Smile Never Gets Old: A California Report on the Oral Health of Older Adults

Despite their unique challenges with access to care, mobility, aging, and health complexities, there has been little attention paid to the status of oral health in older adults. “A Healthy Smile Never Gets Old” examines the unique oral health needs of older adults and offers a series of recommendations for improving access to care and strengthening oral and overall health and well-being amongst older Californians.

The report is designed to:

- 1 Improve our understanding of the oral health of population groups across the lifespan including disease trends and disparities in oral health; and
- 2 Inform the development of strategic and community-based interventions, measure access to and utilization of care, mobilize resources, and develop data-driven programs and policies.



KEY FINDINGS:



- **Half** of the older adults residing in skilled nursing homes have **untreated tooth decay**.
- **One in three** older adults in California’s skilled nursing facilities have **lost all their teeth**.
- **Nearly 40%** of skilled nursing home residents **cannot chew** because they lack functional contact between their upper and lower back teeth.
- **46%** of community-dwelling older adults screened need treatment for **tooth decay and/or periodontal (gum) disease**.
- Older adults who had lost all their natural teeth in rural counties were **twice as likely** to **lack any dentures** compared to urban counterparts.



THE SURVEY APPROACH

Between January 2016 and September 2017, the Center for Oral Health conducted oral health screenings on **2,372** older adults in California. Screenings were conducted at:

SKILLED NURSING HOMES (SNHs)

36 facilities

1,193 residents

COMMUNITY SITES

Included congregate meal sites, adult day care centers and senior centers

51 sites

1,179 participants

Improved oral health will not only help our older adults lead healthier, happier lives, it will also bring significant cost savings by preventing other medical complications that lead to increased healthcare spending.

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Break down health care silos by increasing cross-professional communication and training and adopting an integrated approach to improve health of older adults.
2. Expand the use of innovative practices in oral health including using Silver Diamine Fluoride for dental disease management among frail older adults at high-risk of dental caries, and using mobile systems of dental care delivery to eliminate barriers of transportation.
3. Prioritize older adults' access to care and ability to pay for services through inclusion of benefits in Medicare, increasing reimbursement rates and prioritizing preventive services in Medi-Cal.
4. Include older adults in pilot dental programs and oral health initiatives aimed at healthy aging, and convene a statewide partnership or advisory committee of stakeholders to focus on oral health needs of older adults.
5. Promote specialized clinical and didactic education programs in the oral health care of older adults, for all oral health professionals during their training as well as advanced and specialty residency programs in geriatric dentistry.

Full report available at www.centerfororalhealth.org

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