

The Case for a Dental Benefit in Medicare

When Medicare was first introduced in 1965, oral health was not included as a part of overall health. Since then, research has proven that oral health affects every aspect of overall health. The implications for older adults are greater than for the general population due to higher rates of chronic disease, such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease; chronic pain; difficulties with physical mobility, and issues of cognition and dementia. Multiple morbidities often mean seniors are taking prescription medications and supplements resulting in side effects that impact the oral cavity such as dry mouth and osteonecrosis of the jaw.¹

Nearly 55 million older adults access their healthcare services through Medicare, but traditional plans do not include preventive dental care or routine treatment to maintain a healthy mouth.

THE NEED FOR AFFORDABLE AND QUALITY DENTAL COVERAGE IN MEDICARE IS IMPERATIVE

This is evidenced in part by these realities...

1 in 5 adults aged 65+
have untreated tooth decay²

46% of Americans 65+
do not have dental insurance³

2/3 of seniors earning less than
\$35,000 cannot afford dental care⁴

IMPACT

Cost Savings. Emergency room visits for non-urgent dental conditions have increased from 1.1 million in 2000 to 2.18 million in 2012 and continue to trend upwards. While older adults account for only 4.5% of ER charges, the average charge among seniors is twice as much as that of younger groups.⁵ In addition, ER visits are 10 times more expensive than routine care and provide pain management solutions by prescribing opioids⁶ rather than treating the problem.

Quality of Life. Oral health is related to well-being and quality of life as measured along functional, psychosocial, and economic dimensions. Oral health issues are embarrassing to many and result in isolation and depression. A recent study found isolation has negative effects on older adults' health and is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁷

Oral Health and Nutrition. Older adults experiencing tooth loss avoid nutritious food choices like fruits and vegetables due to an inability to chew properly.⁸

Oral Health is Linked to Chronic Disease. Untreated periodontal disease can increase the risk for or worsen chronic conditions common in aging like diabetes, heart disease and oral cancer.⁹ Individuals with chronic conditions who regularly received recommended dental care, cleanings or periodontal treatment saved an average of \$1,307 on their medical claims compared to those with chronic conditions who received other dental care or no dental care at all.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

While improvements in oral health across the lifespan have been observed in the last half century, long-term concern is warranted for the 10,000 older adults retiring each day. Including a dental benefit in Medicare strengthens our communities and supports our mission of equitable access to oral health. The research and development of a financially viable oral health benefit in publicly funded insurance is necessary so that older Americans in all economic cohorts can access oral healthcare as they do medical care – through Medicare.



oralhealthamerica.org/medicaretoolkit

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