



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC.

OLDER PEOPLE AND ORAL HEALTH

For people aged over 65 years, the prevalence of tooth decay, gum disease and oral cancer is higher than for the general population. Access to dental care can become more difficult as people get older, while oral diseases have the potential to impact negatively on older people's general health and social functioning.

Oral health trends of older people

Long-term oral health trends highlight good and bad news for Australia's ageing population. On the positive side, older people are retaining their natural teeth in greater numbers than before. In 1979, 60% of older people had no natural teeth. By 1989, this had fallen to 44% and is expected to drop to 20% by 2019.¹

The bad news is that older people experience a range of oral health problems at greater rates than the general population. Prominent amongst these are dental decay, gum disease, dry mouth and oral cancer. Teeth extractions associated with gum disease increase with age.² As the table below shows, people aged over 65 years have higher rates of edentulism (missing teeth), few sound teeth and more filled and decayed teeth than the general population.

These problems are not specifically related to old age, but as the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council³ argues:

"The cumulative effects of oral disease throughout life become apparent in old age. In addition, the many chronic and systemic diseases that have been associated with poor oral health become more prevalent".

Older people living in residential accommodation and older people with dementia have particular oral health

problems. These include declining cognitive status, poorer general health, declining physical functioning, difficulties with swallowing, and nutritional problems. Oral diseases and related conditions can lead to pain, problems with speech, discomfort when eating certain foods and concerns about self appearance.⁴

Strategies to improve older people's oral health

Despite research highlighting the relatively poor oral health status of Australia's older population, the ADA considers that too little is being done to redress this. The ADA believes it is the role of the Federal Government to provide leadership to implement the range of initiatives outlined in *Australia's National Oral Health Plan* to improve older people's oral health. Amongst a number of key points, the Plan calls for:

- Improved oral health assessments through the Home and Community Care program and the Aged Care Assessment Service
- Improved oral hygiene programs to assist older people to live independently in the community
- Oral health to be taken into account when care plans are developed for people in residential accommodation
- More affordable transport to enable older people to attend dental appointments
- Greater funding for public dental care

As the number of Australians aged over 65 years is projected to rise from 2.2 million in 1997 to 4 million by 2021,⁵ the ADA believes it is imperative that recommendations outlined in *Australia's National Oral Health Plan* are implemented as a matter of priority.

Edentulism rates and mean numbers of sound, filled and decayed teeth for older Australians, 1988-97

	All Australians aged 5+ (1988-89)	Adults aged 65+ (1996)	Nursing home residents (1997)
Edentulous (%)	16%*	38%	66%
Sound teeth	13.1	8.7	7.0
Filled teeth	5.6	8.3	3.8
Decayed teeth	1.1	0.3	1.1
Total number of teeth	19.8	17.3	11.9

Source: Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (2001) *Oral Health of Australians: National Planning for Oral Health Improvement*, Final Report, Steering Committee for National Planning for Oral Health, p. 36.

* Data only available for people aged 20 years and older

Contacts: Dr Bill O'Reilly, President Mr Robert Boyd-Boland, Chief Executive Officer



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC.

References

1. National Health Strategy (1992) cited in King PL (1999) 'Oral Health Needs of the Elderly', *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 8: 96-97.
2. Giff HC (1998) cited in King PL (1999) 'Oral Health Needs of the Elderly', *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 8: 96-97.
3. Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (2001) *Oral Health Needs of Australians: National Planning for Oral Health Improvement*, Final Report, Steering Committee for National Planning for Oral Health, Australian Health Ministers Conference, p. 36.
4. Chalmers JM (2003) 'Oral health promotion of our ageing Australian population', *Australian Dental Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 1: 2-9.
5. National Advisory Committee on Oral Health (2004) *Healthy Mouths Healthy Lives: Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2004-2013*, A Committee Established by the Australian Health Minister's Conference, p. 24.