

America's well-being depends on oral health

It affects every person in the country – and it's time to make it great

By **Brett Kessler, D.D.S., President, American Dental Association**

January 19, 2025



As a new presidential administration takes office, I'm writing on behalf of the more than 159,000 members of the American Dental Association (ADA) to invite everyone in the American government to take this moment to consider one of the most important issues facing the country today: our oral health.

Oral health affects everyone's overall health and well-being. While policy discussions around health care often focus on medical conditions, it is crucial to recognize that oral health is the bedrock of overall health, with far-reaching implications for physical, mental and social wellness.

Research conducted by the ADA's Forsyth Institute and the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research have established a clear connection between oral health and various systemic diseases, including heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes and hundreds of other associated ailments.

Imagine not being able to chew food, speak clearly or smile because of pain, infection or missing teeth. The impact on quality of life is undeniable.



Sadly, tens of millions of Americans are suffering right now. Some neglect oral health while others face significant barriers to accessing dental care, with many unable to afford necessary treatments or lacking insurance coverage that includes dental services.

It is time for a fundamental change in America's approach to dental care and dental insurance.

As the leading voice for oral health and dentistry, the American Dental Association is committed to improving America's oral health and working with you to bring about meaningful change.

Better access to affordable dental care is not just a matter of improving smiles – it is a matter of improving lives. Expanding dental coverage within public health programs like Medicaid, supporting dental education and incentivizing the inclusion of oral health services in medical insurance plans would provide vital relief to tens of millions of Americans.

Poor oral health is a critical barrier to education, employment and even military deployment.

The acuteness of tooth pain is all encompassing and distracts from one's ability to learn or participate in school. It also creates a social stigma because students with poor oral health smile less, fail to participate in class and miss school. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 34 million school hours are missed annually because of poor oral health.^[1]

America's workers are also dramatically affected by poor oral health. In fact, more than 92 million hours of work are missed annually because of emergency dental care, according to the CDC.^[2]

Dental fitness is considered one of the eight domains of the Department of Defense's Total Fitness Framework. It is one of the key reasons military personnel cannot deploy . A 2022 study found that 10.6 percent of National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers were unready for deployment due to their oral health.^[3]

These realities underscore the urgency of addressing oral health as a national priority . We urge you to consider the broader impact of oral health when shaping future health care policies and to advocate for solutions that will increase access to dental care, particularly for those in underserved communities.

Now is the time for a paradigm shift in how our nation approaches oral health, starting with three areas of focus:

1. **Dental insurance reform:** Oral health is not a luxury; it's essential. Fundamental reform of the dysfunctional commercial market and the inclusion of a comprehensive dental benefit in America's public insurance programs is critical to improving health.
2. **Prevention:** Stop problems before they start. Regular dental visits, brushing twice daily with fluoride toothpaste, maintaining a balanced diet low in added sugars and ultra-processed foods and avoiding tobacco and nicotine products is critical to reducing tooth decay and inflammation, which affects whole body health. Maintaining a robust community water fluoridation initiative – which adjusts the level of naturally

occurring fluoride in water to combat tooth decay – is proven to prevent dental disease before it starts.

3. **Oral health literacy:** Knowledge is power. Understanding the importance good oral health plays in overall health empowers people to make better choices and is essential to fighting off infection and managing chronic disease.

Essential for all these priorities is a prepared and robust dental workforce of dentists, dental hygienists and dental assistants to deliver necessary care to all Americans. We must enhance recruitment and retention of dental professionals and fix shortages to ensure that communities lacking access to oral health services are better served.

By making oral health a priority, we can ensure a healthier and more prosperous future for all Americans and truly make America great again!

Sources

¹ [Oral Health Facts](#)

² [About the Division of Oral Health](#)

³ [Army Reserve Component Dental Health and Readiness.](#)

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