

A photograph of an older couple smiling and taking a selfie. The woman on the left has short, wavy grey hair, wears black-rimmed glasses, a white pearl necklace, and a white ruffled top. The man on the right has a grey beard and mustache, blue eyes, and is wearing a grey button-down shirt. They are holding a white smartphone together. In the background, there are several large, rose-gold balloons, one of which is shaped like a flower.

# OLDER AMERICANS' ORAL CARE REGRETS, BARRIERS & IMPACT

## Delta Dental's Senior Oral Health Report

Oral health represents an important part of one's overall health, and unfortunately, some Americans don't yet realize the importance of oral healthcare until their later years. Positive benefits also exist in terms of emotional health and well-being. However, the path to both begins with taking better care of one's teeth and overall oral health early in life.

**Among older Americans, those 50 and up, lack of attention to such stems from several factors but end in regret and negative emotional and mental health.**

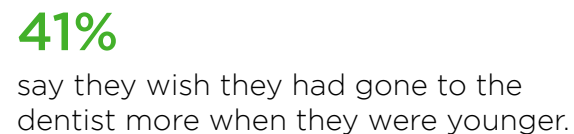
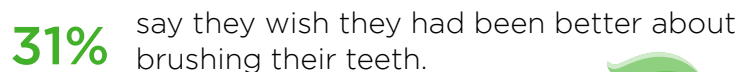
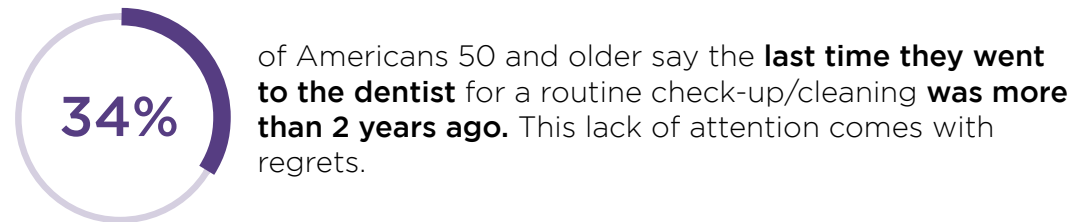
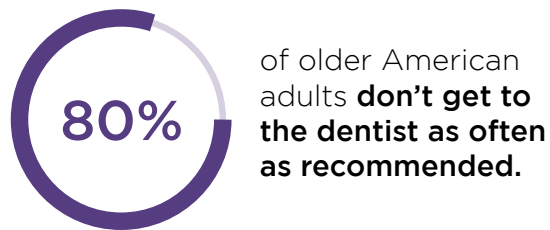
A survey commissioned by Delta Dental explored how older Americans feel about the level of care they've given to their teeth; their understanding of oral health's importance; barriers to oral care and the outcomes of not taking better care of their teeth.



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# OLDER AMERICANS REGRET NOT TAKING BETTER CARE OF THEIR TEETH BUT STILL AREN'T DOING SO

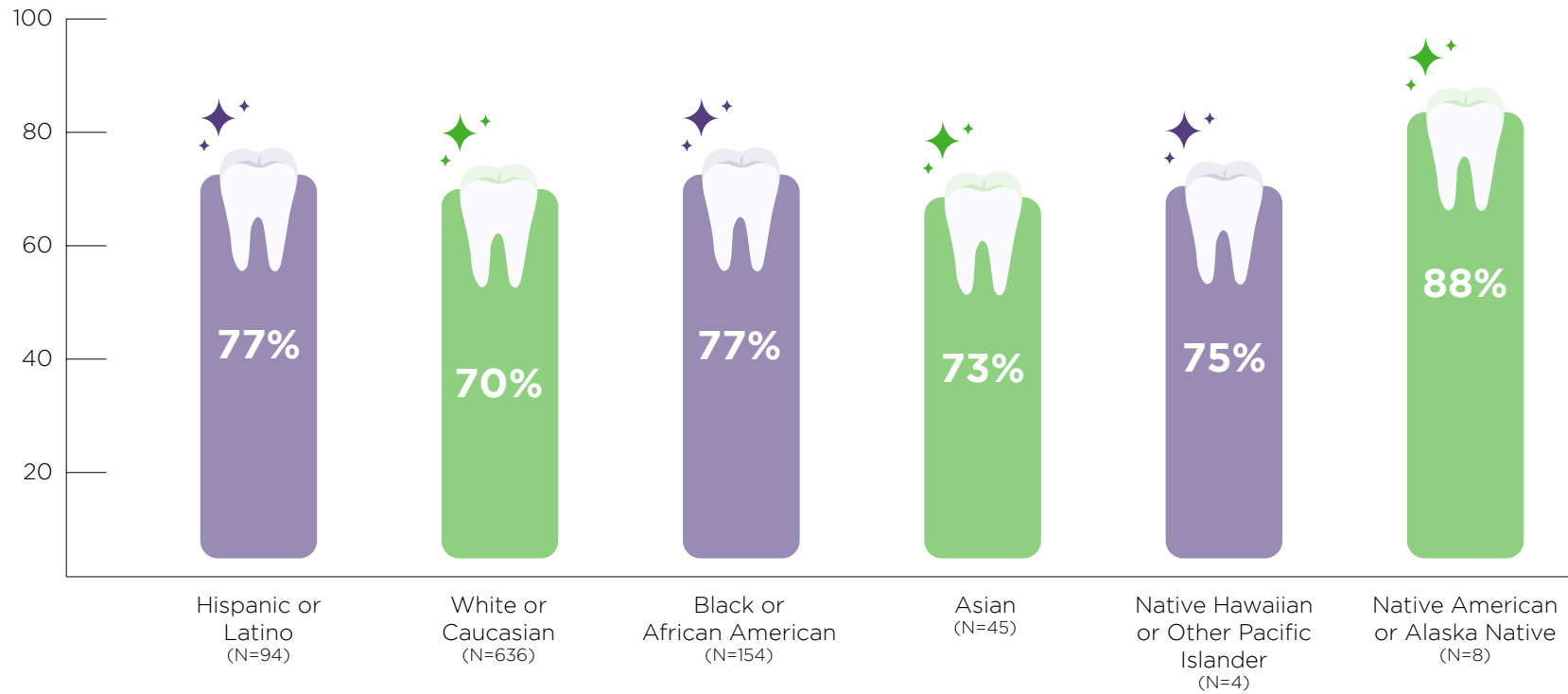


That wish is higher for most older BIPOC Americans, particularly older Native American or Alaskan Natives; older Hispanic or Latino Americans and older Black/African Americans.



## “I WISH I HAD TAKEN BETTER CARE OF MY TEETH WHEN I WAS YOUNGER.”

(% Any Agree)



Americans **top 3 biggest regrets** regarding their physical health:



**NOT** exercising more



**NOT** eating more fruits and vegetables



**NOT** brushing and flossing more



# BARRIERS TO ORAL CARE

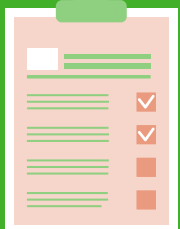
Despite regrets, **older Americans still aren't taking care of their oral health** but recognizing the barriers can lead to ways to overcome those.

## BARRIER 1: Lack of Understanding of Oral Health and Overall Health Connection

Older Americans realize the importance of oral health in their later years, yet findings suggest they could be better informed on the connection between oral health and overall health. In fact, most don't speak to their primary care providers nor their dentist about those connections.


**3 IN 5**  did not know that **gum swelling** can be linked to diabetes, heart disease and an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.

**2 IN 3**  have never discussed their **dental visits or oral health** with their primary care provider.


**55%** say they **never discussed** their **overall/general health or current medications** with their dentist. 

## BARRIER 2: Access to Oral Health Care

Some barriers to oral health care relate to access. Having barriers to physically accessing dental care represents a crucial factor for older Americans but impact some far differently than others.

**33%**  of all older Americans would be **more likely to see a dentist if they had access to mobile dental clinics.**

**That number goes up to nearly 50% among older BIPOC Americans.**

**1 IN 3**  older **BIPOC Americans rely on other transportation options** — besides driving themselves — to get to the dentist, or they do not go to the dentist altogether.

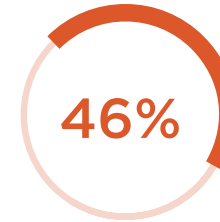




In addition, more older BIPOC Americans (**35%**) than older white Americans (**25%**) say that they have to **commute 30 minutes to an hour or more to get to the dentist.**

### **BARRIER 3: Emotional Response to Dental Visits**

Not all barriers to oral care are physical in terms of geography or access to transportation. Some are emotional, which could be more difficult to overcome because physical solutions don't exist. These negative emotions and sentiments related to visiting the dentist create a cycle of oral care neglect that can have additional mental health and well-being impacts over time.

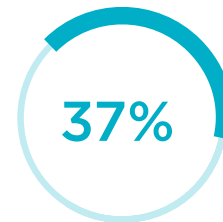


of Americans 50 and older state that the top reason that they don't visit the dentist is because they either don't like or fear going to the dentist.



# POOR ORAL HEALTH HAS DIRECT AND SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS ON EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Feeling like one's best self can often start with a nice smile. While most medical professionals agree oral health impacts physical health, a good portion of older Americans are experiencing how oral health affects their emotional and social well-being too. From worries of how they're perceived by others based on their smile to smiling less because of worsening oral health as they age, findings highlight that older Americans' teeth have an impact on how they feel about themselves and that has physical impacts as well.



say they are worried about being **negatively judged** based on the **appearance of their teeth**.

**2 IN 5**

say they **smile less** compared to when they were younger due to **deteriorating oral health** or the **appearance of their teeth**.



# THE INCREDIBLE ROLE THAT OUR ORAL HEALTH PLAYS IN OUR OVERALL HEALTH

“

It can be said that if our eyes are the window to our soul, then our mouth is a mirror to our health. While this may seem farfetched, the truth is that one of the first indicators that you may have an underlying systemic health issue may be trouble in our mouths. A disease that starts with our teeth or gums can have profound effects on our body, mind and quality of life. Despite this, we continue to separate dental health from general health, including mental and psychosocial health. This can lead to a decline in overall well-being and have a severe impact on our daily lives.

- Dr. Daniel Croley, Delta Dental's Chief Dental Officer

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## Your Mouth is the Gateway to Your Body

Your mouth is a portal to the rest of the body. If your teeth and gums have inflammation, bacteria or decay, that bacteria travels to the bloodstream where it can set up shop in other parts of the body like your heart, lungs and brain.

### Oral care and bodily health connections unknown to older Americans:



83%

don't know **gingivitis is contagious** and can be passed through **kissing**.



64%

don't know their dentist **can tell** if they might have **cancer** just by **examining their mouth**.



61%

don't know **gum swelling** can be linked to **diabetes, heart disease,** and increased risk of **Alzheimer's disease**.



40%

don't know **bacteria from your mouth** can spread to other parts of your **body**.





## What you can do for your Oral Health / Body Prevention:

- Visit your dentist twice a year, drink fluoridated water, brush twice a day for two minutes and floss daily.
- Talk to your dentist AND doctor about the connection between your oral health and the health of your body.
- Discuss the side effects of your medication with both your doctor AND dentist.
- Plan for retirement. Medicare dental coverage is limited, and many people are surprised to find out that this vital health need is no longer covered when they retire. If dental coverage is out of your budget, be certain to work with your dental provider to understand pricing or use your local health department as a resource to find cost-effective options in your area.

## Your Mouth is Connected to Your Quality of Life and Social Well-Being

If you have pain or can't eat foods you love, these issues can impair not only your enjoyment in life but the psychosocial skills that help you become a successful person. In fact, if you tend to put your hand over your mouth a lot or refrain from smiling, that can change not only how you feel about yourself but how others feel about you.

## What you can do for your Oral Health / Body Prevention:

- Talk to your dentist about how you feel about your teeth and whether your teeth keep you from smiling or talking with others.
- Don't abandon oral care because you don't like how your teeth look. Brush and floss daily.
- There may be affordable options to make changes to your smile when it comes to color, shape and missing or crooked teeth. Explore these options with your dentist.

The misconception that dental problems and health issues are somehow separate from our overall health is a serious problem. Fortunately, it's increasingly hard to ignore as we learn more about the direct link between the diseases that start in our mouth and how they can wreak havoc on the rest of our bodies. As we talk more about our oral health issues with all our health professionals, we can put the mouth back into the body and care for our whole selves all the way into our golden years.

It's not too late to improve your oral health habits:

Follow the **“Rule of 2-1-2”**

2

Brush **2**  
times per  
day for **2**  
minutes



1

Floss  
at least  
**once**  
daily



2

See your  
dentist for  
check-ups **2**  
times a year.



# DELTA DENTAL'S COMMITMENT

Delta Dental is committed to providing older adults with consistent, quality access to oral health care, improving education and driving lasting policy changes to address systemic issues.

To learn more, visit  
<https://www1.deltadentalins.com/newsroom.html>



# ABOUT DELTA DENTAL

Since 1955, Delta Dental of California has offered comprehensive, high-quality oral health care coverage to millions of enrollees and built the strongest network of dental providers in the country. The Delta Dental of California enterprise includes its affiliates Delta Dental Insurance Company, Delta Dental of Pennsylvania, Delta Dental of New York, Inc., as well as the national DeltaCare USA network, and provides dental benefits to more than 40 million people across 15 states and the District of Columbia\*. All are members of the Delta Dental Plans Association based in Oak Brook, Illinois, the not-for-profit national association that through a national network of Delta Dental companies collectively covers millions of people nationwide.

For more information about Delta Dental of California, please visit [www.deltadentalins.com](http://www.deltadentalins.com).

*\*Delta Dental of California's operating areas encompass Alabama, California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, West Virginia and the District of Columbia.*



## Methodology

Delta Dental commissioned Atomik Research to conduct an online survey of 1,010 Americans 50 years of age or older. The margin of error is +/- 3 percentage points with a confidence interval of 95 percent. Fieldwork took place between June 24th and July 1st of 2022. Atomik Research is an independent market research agency.

