



## Fact Sheet

# Senior Oral Health Report: Older Americans' Oral Care Regrets, Barriers and Impact



### Overview:

Why do we need to be prioritizing senior oral health?

By 2060  
overall population

# 24%

will be seniors

# 65<sup>+</sup>

Critically underserved  
population

# 60

diseases in the body  
are related to gum disease

# 2 in 3

65 years or older  
have gum disease

We are all constantly aging... age doesn't just sneak up on you. Our oral health and overall health are directly linked, and many chronic conditions that we face as we age have implications for our oral health as well.

By 2060, the number of US adults aged 65 years or older is expected to reach 98 million, 24% of the overall population.<sup>1</sup>

Adults aged 65 years and older as the most critically underserved and vulnerable population for oral health care in America.<sup>2</sup>

Periodontal or gum disease, which is red, inflamed, bleeding gums, is related to nearly 60 diseases in the body.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly 2 in 3 (68%) adults aged 65 years or older have gum disease. And nearly 1 in 5 of adults aged 65 or older have lost all of their teeth.<sup>4</sup>

1. [SOURCE: CDC/ US CENSUS BUREAU]

2. [SOURCE: THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH (NIH) - ORAL HEALTH IN AMERICA: ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES]

3. [SOURCE: NIH - ORAL HEALTH IN AMERICA: ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES]

4. [SOURCE: CDC]



Older Americans regret not taking better care of their teeth, but still aren't doing so. Delta Dental's Senior Oral Health Report examines the barriers to and negative impacts of not caring for our oral health as we age.

## SECTION 1:

### Older Americans regret not caring for their teeth

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80% of older American adults don't get to the dentist as often as recommended. In fact, over a third (34%) of Americans 50 and older say the last time they went to the dentist for a routine check-up/cleaning was more than 2 years ago.

Over 7 in 10 (72%) of Americans 50 and older say that they wish they had taken better care of their teeth when they were younger. 38% say they wish they had flossed more and 31% say they wish they had been better about brushing their teeth.

41% of Americans 50 and older say they wish they had gone to the dentist more when they were younger.

52% of Hispanic or Latino and 50% of Black Americans 50 years of age and older say that they strongly agree with the statement "I wish I had taken better care of my teeth when I was younger."

Americans 50 years and older rank "not brushing and flossing more" as their third biggest regret regarding their physical health. Exercising more and eating healthy were the first and second biggest regrets.

#### AMERICANS 50+ BIGGEST REGRET



1. EXERCISING



2. EATING HEALTHY



3. FLOSSING AND  
BRUSHING TEETH

## SECTION 2:

### Older Americans still aren't taking care of their oral health... Why? Understanding the barriers to care.

Our data has identified the following barriers to access to care for older Americans.

#### 01 Barrier I

Lack of understanding of oral health and overall health connection



Oral health is an important part of the body's overall health; unfortunately, some don't yet realize **how important oral healthcare is until they are older**. A majority (72%) of Americans 50 and up say they wish they had taken better care of their teeth during their younger years.

Americans are realizing the importance of oral health in their later years, yet findings suggest most older Americans could be better informed on the connection between oral health and overall health. In fact, **most are not talking to their primary care providers about their dental health** nor are they talking to their dentist about their overall health or current medications.

 61%

**Three in five (61%) of Americans** over the age of 50 did not know that gum swelling can be linked to diabetes, heart disease, and an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.

**2 in 3**

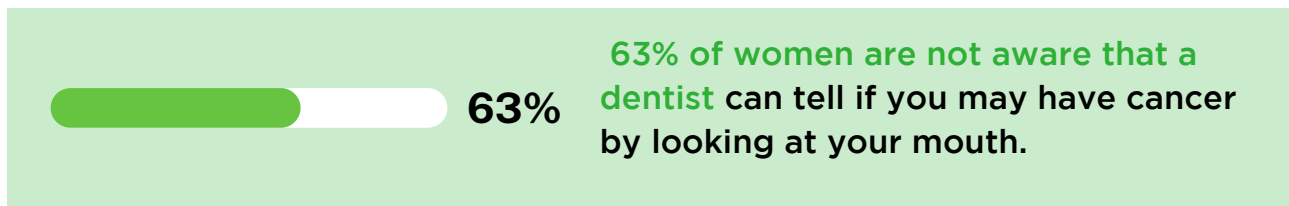
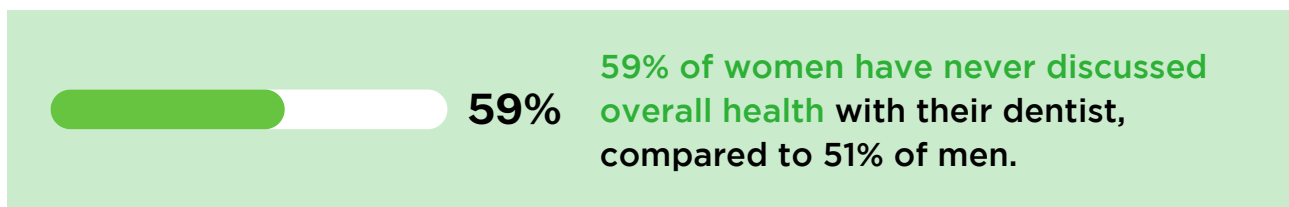
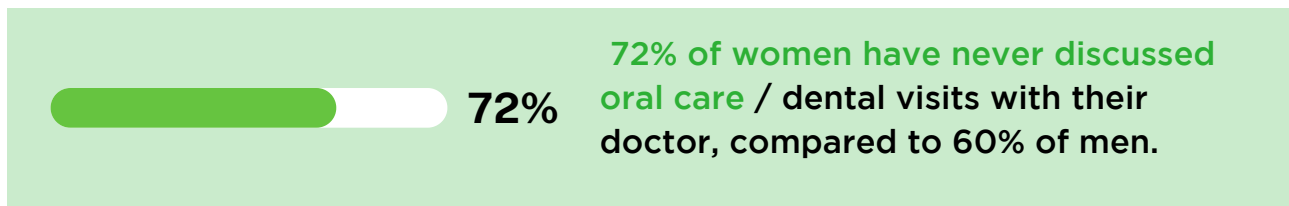
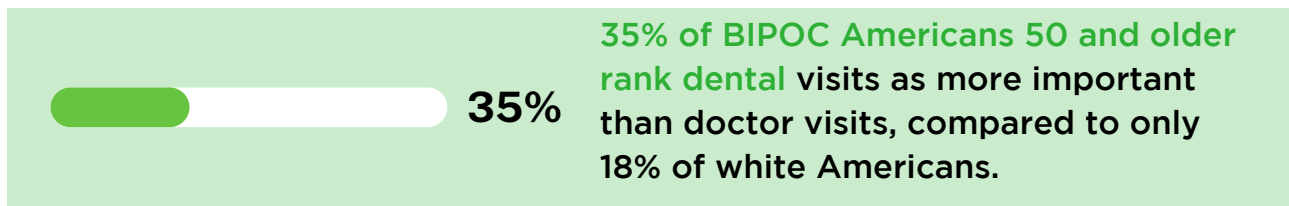
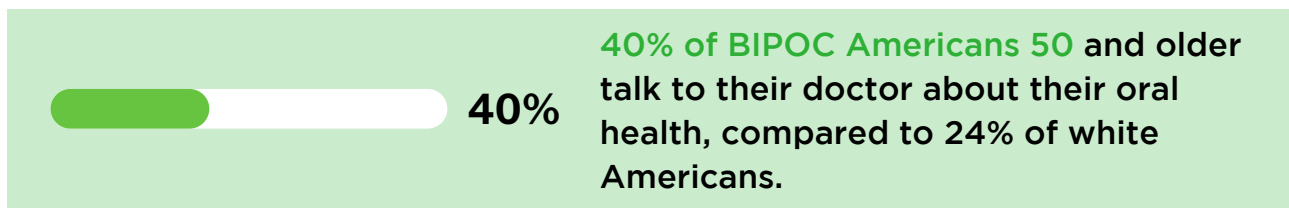
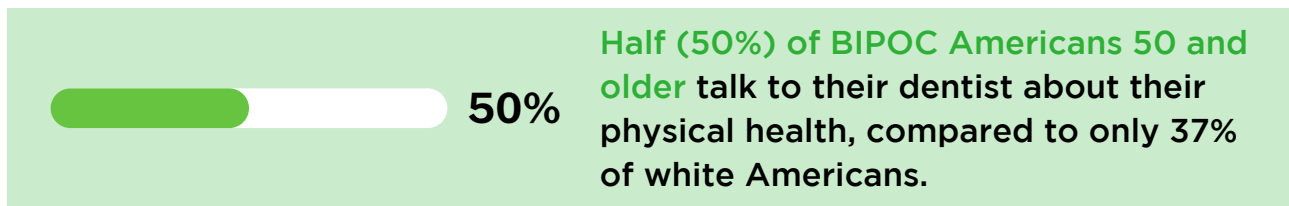
**Two in three (66%)** Americans 50 and older **have never discussed their dental visits** or oral health with their primary care provider.



**Over half (55%) of Americans 50 and older** say they never discussed their overall/general health or current medications with their dentist.



When we look at this data from a race or gender perspective, the gaps in understanding widen. Interestingly, we found that **non-white people and men** are more likely to connect their oral health to their physical health.



## 02 Barrier II

### Access to oral health care



Americans in their 50s, 60s, 70s and older indicate barriers to dental 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.**

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) disproportionately face barriers to physically accessing dental care. **People of color more often indicate they have to rely on less convenient forms of transportation and have longer commute times when traveling to the dentist.**



**A third (33%) of Americans over the age of 50 would be more likely to see a dentist if they had access to mobile dental clinics. The number goes up to 50% among Hispanic/Latino and BIPOC communities.**



**Nearly one in three (30%) BIPOC Americans 50 and older rely on a mode of transportation other than their own car to get to the dentist.**



Minutes

**Commute time for BIPOC patients is longer than for white patients - 75% of white Americans 50 and older can get to their dentist in 30 minutes or less while the same is true for only 65% of BIPOC Americans 50 and older.**

**03** **Barrier III**

**Emotional response to dental visits**

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. Better preventive care reduces costs overtime.



46% of Americans 50 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.**

"Healthy Aging month in September is a national observance to focus attention on the positive aspects of growing older, including the importance of maintaining our oral health as we age."



## SECTION 3:

### Poor oral health has direct and significant impacts on emotional and mental health

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Feeling like your best self starts with a nice smile. While most medical professionals agree oral health impacts physical health, a good portion of older Americans share how they feel oral health affects their emotional and social well-being. From worry about how others perceive them based on their smile, to smiling less than usual because of worsening oral health as they age, findings highlight that older Americans' teeth have an impact on how they feel.

Almost two in five (37%) Americans 50 and older say they are worried about being negatively judged based on the appearance of their teeth.

30% of Americans 50 and older say the appearance of their teeth stops them from smiling in photos. 30% also say they're missing out on connecting with people because they're embarrassed to smile or laugh.

Two in five (40%) Americans 50 and older say they smile less compared to when they were younger due to deteriorating oral health or the appearance of their teeth. 22% say the appearance of their teeth prevents them from smiling with strangers

29% of BIPOC Americans 50 and older say that spending time on Zoom has made them more self-conscious about their smile, whereas 17% of white Americans 50 and older say the same.

# Delta Dental's Commitment

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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.

## Methodology

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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.



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