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NEWS RELEASES

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Report details 20 years of advances and challenges of Americans' oral health

Oral Health in America





Advances and Challenges



NIH's new report, *Oral Health in America: Advances and Challenges*, provides a road map on how to improve the nation's oral health. *NIDCR*

Despite important advances in the understanding and treatment of oral diseases and conditions, many people in the U.S. still have chronic oral health problems and lack of access to care, according to a report by the National Institutes of Health. *Oral Health in America: Advances and Challenges*, is a follow-up to the seminal 2000 *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General*. The new report, which is intended to provide a road map on how to improve the nation's oral health, draws primarily on information from public research and evidence-based practices and was compiled and reviewed by NIH's National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) and a large, diverse, multi-disciplinary team of more than 400 experts.

The report updates the findings of the 2000 publication and highlights the national importance of oral health and its relationship to overall health. It also focuses on new scientific and technological knowledge – as well as innovations in health care delivery – that offer promising new directions for improving oral health care and creating greater equity in oral health across communities. Achieving that equity is an ongoing challenge for many who struggle to obtain dental insurance and access to affordable care.

“This is a very significant report,” said NIH Acting Director Lawrence A. Tabak, D.D.S., Ph.D. “It is the most comprehensive assessment of oral health currently available in the United States and it shows, unequivocally, that oral health plays a central role in overall health. Yet millions of Americans still do not have access to routine and preventative oral care.”

The newly issued report provides a comprehensive snapshot of oral health in America, including an examination of oral health across the lifespan and a look at the impact the issue has on communities and the economy. Major take-aways from the report include:

- Healthy behaviors can improve and maintain an individual's oral health, but these behaviors are also shaped by social and economic conditions.
- Oral and medical conditions often share common risk factors, and just as medical conditions and their treatments can influence oral health, so can oral conditions and their treatments affect other health issues.
- Substance misuse and mental health conditions negatively affect the oral health of many.
- Group disparities around oral health, identified 20 years ago, have not been adequately addressed, and greater efforts are needed to tackle both the social and commercial determinants that create these inequities and the systemic biases that perpetuate them.

“This is an in-depth review of the scientific knowledge surrounding oral health that has accumulated over the last two decades,” said Rena D’Souza D.D.S., Ph.D., director of NIDCR, which oversaw and funded the project’s three-year research program. “It provides an important window into how many societal factors intersect to create advantages and disadvantages with respect to oral health, and, critically, overall health.”

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged while the report was being written. The science around SARS-CoV-2 continues to come into focus in real-time, and, although data were only starting to surface about the oral implications of the disease, the authors included a preliminary analysis of it to assess initial impacts.

The authors make several recommendations to improve oral health in America, which include the need for health care professionals to work together to provide integrated oral, medical, and behavioral health care in schools, community health centers, nursing homes, and medical care settings, as well as dental clinics. They also identify the need to improve access to care by developing a more diverse oral health care workforce, addressing the rising cost of dental education, expanding insurance coverage, and improving the overall affordability of care.

“Although there are challenges ahead, the report gives us a starting point and some clear goals that offer reasons to be hopeful, despite those challenges,” added D’Souza. “It imagines a future, as I do, in which systemic inequities that affect oral health and access to care are more fully addressed, and one in which dental and medical professionals work together to provide integrated care for all.”

Scientists and public health professionals will use the report to identify areas of scientific inquiry and research as well as develop and implement programs that ultimately will improve the oral health of individuals, communities, and the nation.

To view or download the report, please visit the NIDCR website at <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/oralhealthinamerica>.

Questions about the report? Email OralHealthReport@nih.gov or call NIDCR at 1-866-232-4528.

About the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research: NIDCR is the nation’s leading funder of research on oral, dental, and craniofacial health.

About the National Institutes of Health (NIH): NIH, the nation’s medical research agency, includes 27 Institutes and Centers and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIH is the primary federal agency conducting and supporting basic, clinical, and translational medical research, and is investigating the causes, treatments, and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more information about NIH and its programs, visit www.nih.gov.

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