



Oral Health Maintenance as a Determinant of Well-Being in Advanced Adulthood

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DESCRIPTION

The extension of human lifespan during recent decades has encouraged greater attention toward factors that influence quality of life in later adulthood. While considerable research has examined chronic diseases, mobility, nutrition, and cognitive performance, oral health has often received less attention despite its substantial influence on daily living. The condition of the teeth, gums, tongue, and supporting oral structures can affect nutrition, communication, social participation, emotional well-being, and overall physical health. Increasing evidence suggests that maintaining good oral health may contribute significantly to healthy aging and support a higher level of independence among older adults.

Aging is accompanied by various physiological changes that may influence oral health. Saliva production can decrease, particularly among individuals who use multiple medications. Reduced saliva flow may contribute to dry mouth, increasing susceptibility to tooth decay, oral infections, and difficulties with chewing and swallowing. In addition, age-related changes in immune function may alter the body's response to bacteria within the oral cavity, making preventive care especially important. Tooth loss remains a common concern among older adults in many regions of the world. Missing teeth can affect the ability to chew a variety of foods, often leading individuals to avoid fruits, vegetables, nuts, and other nutrient-rich items that require greater chewing effort. As a result, dietary quality may decline, potentially influencing overall health status. Maintaining natural teeth whenever possible can support dietary diversity and help individuals obtain essential nutrients needed for healthy aging.

Periodontal disease, which affects the tissues supporting the teeth, is another condition frequently observed in older populations. This disorder develops when bacterial accumulation leads to inflammation of the gums and surrounding structures. If left untreated, periodontal disease may result in tooth mobility and eventual tooth loss. Research has suggested associations between periodontal disease and several systemic conditions, including cardiovascular disorders and

metabolic abnormalities. Although these relationships continue to be studied, the findings emphasize the importance of oral health as part of comprehensive health management. Speech and communication represent additional dimensions of oral health that affect aging experiences. Teeth, tongue movement, and oral muscle function play essential roles in producing clear speech. Dental problems may alter pronunciation and reduce communication confidence. Individuals who experience difficulties speaking may become less inclined to participate in conversations, social gatherings, or community activities. Maintaining oral function can support interpersonal communication and social engagement throughout later life.

The psychological effects of oral health deserve careful consideration. Appearance often remains important regardless of age, and dental conditions can influence self-esteem and social confidence. Missing teeth, visible decay, or oral discomfort may contribute to embarrassment or withdrawal from social situations. Conversely, good oral health can encourage participation in family events, community activities, and interpersonal relationships that contribute positively to emotional well-being. Researchers have also explored connections between oral health and cognitive function. Some studies have observed associations between tooth loss and reduced cognitive performance, although the mechanisms involved remain under investigation. Potential explanations include nutritional effects, inflammatory processes, and changes in sensory stimulation related to chewing. Mastication activates multiple neural pathways, and some researchers suggest that maintaining effective chewing ability may contribute to brain function during aging. Further studies are needed to clarify these relationships and determine their clinical significance.

Oral hygiene practices remain fundamental throughout adulthood and into advanced age. Regular brushing, flossing, and professional dental care can help reduce bacterial accumulation and prevent many common oral conditions. However, physical limitations may create challenges for some older adults. Arthritis, reduced hand strength, visual impairments, and neurological conditions can make oral hygiene tasks more difficult. Adaptive devices and supportive care

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strategies may help individuals maintain effective oral care routines despite these challenges. The role of caregivers becomes increasingly important for individuals with significant functional limitations. Family members and professional caregivers often assist with oral hygiene among older adults who require support. Training programs that emphasize oral health education can improve care quality and reduce the likelihood of preventable dental problems. Integrating oral health into broader caregiving practices may contribute to better overall health outcomes.

Long-term care facilities face unique oral health considerations. Residents frequently have complex medical conditions, multiple medications, and varying degrees of cognitive impairment. These factors can increase vulnerability to oral disease. Regular dental assessments and preventive care programs within residential settings may help identify concerns before they

become severe. Such efforts may improve comfort, nutrition, and quality of life among institutionalized older adults.

CONCLUSION

As populations age across the globe, maintaining oral health is becoming increasingly relevant to public health planning and clinical practice. Healthy teeth, gums, and oral tissues contribute to nutrition, communication, social participation, emotional confidence, and physical comfort. Through preventive care, education, improved access to services, and continued scientific investigation, oral health can play an important role in supporting active and fulfilling lives during later adulthood. Recognizing its significance may help individuals and healthcare systems address aging in a more comprehensive and effective manner.