

## Americans Living Longer, Facing More Oral Health Challenges

*National Healthy Aging Month a Good Time to Take Inventory of Oral Health*

By Katina Spadoni, DDS

Americans are living longer, and the number of Americans age 65 and older is expected to rise to 83.7 million in 2050, almost double the number of seniors in 2012, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Tooth loss, once considered a rite of passage in the aging process, is far less prevalent today. In fact, in 1960 more than 50 percent of adults aged 65 and over had lost all of their teeth; today, that number is down to 19 percent.

Longer lives with original teeth is a good thing, yet, September – National Healthy Aging Month – is a good time to examine potential dental problems for older Americans. As adults live longer and keep their teeth, more are at risk for dental diseases and need preventive, restorative and periodontal care.

For example, many of today's older adults did not have access to fluoridated water and toothpaste until well into their adult years. As a result, many have experienced tooth decay and cavities. A 2014 survey of Illinois seniors conducted by the Illinois Department of Public Health and others found that 29 percent of these adults had untreated cavities. That number mirrors the number of Illinois parents reporting cavities treated in their children's mouths, according to a Delta Dental of Illinois survey conducted from December 2015 to January 2016.

Cavities, tooth decay and gum disease are chronic diseases that affect people of all ages. The oral health lessons learned as children ring true today. Dentists advise everyone, including older adults, to: brush twice a day with a toothpaste containing fluoride, floss daily and make and keep regular dental appointments.

Regular dental appointments provide a comprehensive exam of teeth, gums and soft tissue, as well as an oral cancer screening. In addition to prevention, detection and early treatment, these appointments give the dental professional the opportunity to evaluate a patient's home care practices.

People with dental insurance are nearly twice as likely to visit the dentist as those without insurance, according to a Delta Dental of Illinois survey. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found that individuals with dental insurance also are far less likely to have unmet dental needs than those without insurance. The same Illinois Department of Public Health survey conducted in 2014 found that 81 percent of the older adults questioned had no dental insurance and as a result, no impetus to visit the dentist, significantly affecting their oral health and overall health.

What else can older Illinois adults do to maintain their oral health?

- Increase calcium intake to maintain healthy bones and teeth.
- Quit using tobacco products and reduce alcohol consumption. Tobacco and alcohol use can increase one's risk for oral cancer, gum disease and tooth decay.
- Understand the side effects of common prescriptions and over-the-counter medications taken by older adults, which cause a condition known as dry mouth. Having a dry mouth can make chewing, speaking and swallowing difficult and can increase the risk of developing cavities and the soft tissue problems that can lead to tooth loss. Dry mouth also may reduce a person's ability to wear dentures.
- Get dental coverage. Delta Dental of Illinois has individual and family plans available for adults of all ages. Visit [www.deltadentalil.me](http://www.deltadentalil.me) to view our plan offerings.

Resources are available for older adults seeking to take care of their oral health. Delta Dental of Illinois' site [YourOralHealthHub.com](http://YourOralHealthHub.com) is a valuable resource for adults looking to learn more about oral health concerns and treatment for older adults. Other resources for information on oral health and wellness include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging, the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**Katina Spadoni, DDS, is dental director for Delta Dental of Illinois**

#### **About Delta Dental of Illinois**

Delta Dental of Illinois is a not-for-profit dental service corporation that provides dental benefit programs to individuals and more than 5,000 employee groups throughout Illinois. Delta Dental of Illinois covers 2 million individuals, employees and family members nationwide. Delta Dental of Illinois is based in Naperville, Illinois and offers single-site administration and client services.