

Dental Access Project

Why Does Oral Health Matter?

Dental disease hurts more than our teeth. It's tied to our overall health. Tooth decay can risk our physical, mental, and economic wellbeing. It also strains state budgets. Policy barriers keep many people from getting the care and support they need to have good oral health. Due to structural racism and economic inequity, this most harms Black and Brown people, American Indian/Alaska Native communities, and people with low incomes. *But with policy change, we can achieve good oral health for everyone.*

Oral health is a core part of our overall health, shaping our wellbeing at every age:

- **Staying healthy throughout our lives:** Good oral health helps our physical and mental health. Dental disease can harm our [heart](#) and [lungs](#)—raising our risk of diabetes and pneumonia—and our [cognitive ability](#) as we age. It can also take a toll on our [mental health](#), as one factor leading to [depression](#) and [low self-confidence](#).
- **Having a healthy pregnancy and childhood:** Good oral health can support a [healthy pregnancy](#) and give newborns a strong start. But untreated dental disease may lead to [complications](#) such as preeclampsia, a dangerous blood pressure condition, or giving birth too soon. Children with good oral health are better able to eat, sleep, speak, and socialize, key aspects of healthy development.

Good oral health supports individual and shared success, while dental disease imposes far-reaching consequences on children, families, and communities:

- **Family economic security:** Due to societal assumptions about appearance, adults with good oral health may have more [job opportunities](#) than their peers with dental disease. Healthy teeth can also help women earn [4.5 percent more](#) than their peers.
- **Success in school:** A child with good oral health will do better in school. Kids with dental pain are [four times more likely](#) to earn lower grades than healthier students. Untreated tooth decay interferes with their ability to learn and attend school.

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- **Costs to states:** When policy barriers push good oral health out of reach, avoidable dental problems can become emergencies. This makes dental disease costly for communities. In 2016, dental-related visits to hospital emergency rooms cost the U.S. health system over [\\$2 billion](#). Opening up access to prevention, timely care, and other key supports can help more people manage underlying decay before it gets out of hand, lowering costs to states.

Oral health is a racial and economic justice issue:

- **Policies based on systemic racism and economic inequity put the steepest barriers to good oral health in the path of Black and Brown people, indigenous people, and people with low incomes.** Given these hurdles, Black and Brown children and those in low-income families have [higher rates](#) of cavities than their white, wealthier peers. Black and Latinx adults have higher rates of [untreated tooth decay](#) than their white peers, risking their health and financial security.
- **Dental deserts threaten people of color:** More than [70 million](#) people live in an area without enough dental providers. This gap [most hurts](#) Black and Brown people, Indigenous people, and immigrants. It also falls hardest on people with low incomes.
- **Coverage gaps hurt struggling adults and families:** For people who count on Medicaid, policy barriers push comprehensive dental coverage out of reach. In 2022, low-income adults and pregnant people could only access extensive dental coverage in [25 states and Washington D.C.](#)

Virtually all dental disease is preventable when we get the right support. A range of [policy solutions](#) exist that can ensure we all have the support we need to have good oral health.