



## Disparities in Oral Health



Oral health disparities are profound in the United States. Despite major improvements in oral health for the population as a whole, oral health disparities exist for many racial and ethnic groups, by socioeconomic status, gender, age and geographic location

Some social factors that can contribute to these differences are lifestyle behaviors such as tobacco use, frequency of alcohol use, and poor dietary choices. Just like they affect general health, these behaviors can affect oral. The economic factors that often relate to poor oral health include access to health services and an individual's ability to get and keep dental insurance.

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Some of the oral health disparities that exist include the following:

- **Overall.** Non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians and Alaska Natives generally have the poorest oral health of any racial and ethnic groups in the United States.
- **Children and Tooth Decay.** The greatest racial and ethnic disparity among children aged 2–4 years and aged 6–8 years is seen in Mexican American and black, non-Hispanic children.
- **Adults and Untreated Tooth Decay.** Blacks, non-Hispanics, and Mexican Americans aged 35–44 years experience untreated tooth decay nearly twice as much as white, non-Hispanics.
- **Tooth Decay and Education.** Adults aged 35–44 years with less than a high school education experience untreated tooth decay nearly three times that of adults with at least some college education.
  - In addition, adults aged 35–44 years with less than a high school education experience destructive periodontal (gum) disease nearly three times that of adults with a least some college education.
- **Adults and Oral Cancer.** The 5–year survival rate is lower for oral pharyngeal (throat) cancers among black men than whites (36% versus 61%).
- **Adults and Periodontitis.** 47.2% of U.S. adults have some form of periodontal disease. In adults aged 65 and older, 70.1% have periodontal disease.

*Healthy People 2020* is the nation's framework to improve the health of all Americans. The overarching goals of *Healthy People 2020* are to increase quality and years of healthy life and eliminate health disparities. Interventions such as community water fluoridation and school-based dental sealant programs can help achieve this goal.

reduces and aids in preventing tooth decay among different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups. Currently, this *Healthy People 2020* objective is moving toward its target of 79.6% of community water having fluoride.

School-based dental sealant programs provide sealants to children who may not receive routine dental care. This includes children at highest risk for tooth decay: those from low-income families and certain racial and ethnic groups. Sealants are thin plastic coatings applied to the tiny grooves on the chewing surfaces of the teeth.

A recent NCHS data brief provides an overview on select Health People Oral Health objectives using NHANES 2009/2010 data.

Visit the following Web sites for more information on oral health disparities:

- Oral Health Topic Area – Oral Health Disparities (<http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/about/foundation-health-measures/Disparities>). You will learn about oral health disparities as classified by race, ethnicity, age, and education.
- Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General (<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/reports/oralhealth>). This major report explains that tooth decay remains a big problem in the United States for low-income and minority populations and suggests ways to improve the situation.
- A National Call to Action to Promote Oral Health. The Call to Action builds on the Surgeon General's report and the *Healthy People 2020* oral health objectives.

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