

The State of Oral Health Equity in America 2022

RESEARCH REPORT

Americans Are Still Not Getting the Dental Care They Need

**Two years after dental care was disrupted for millions of Americans,
disparities in the nation's oral health care persist**

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Methodology

The State of Oral Health Equity in America survey is a nationally representative survey of consumer attitudes, experiences, and behaviors related to oral health. The study was designed by CareQuest Institute for Oral Health. Results were collected by NORC at the University of Chicago in January–February 2021 and January–February 2022 on adults 18 and older on the AmeriSpeak panel. AmeriSpeak is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the United States' (US) household population. Randomly selected US households were sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from NORC National Sample Frame. Sampled households were contacted by US mail, telephone, and field interviewers. A sampling unit of 17,603 was used, with a final sample size of 5,682 and a final weighted cumulative response rate of 4.0%. All data presented account for appropriate sample weights. The margin of error for the survey is 1.75%.



The COVID-19 pandemic shone a light on oral health disparities caused by lack of dental insurance and delays in care, resulting in exacerbated oral health inequities.

With increased vaccination rates and decreasing cases in the United States (US), many expected these disparities to diminish. For too many individuals, however, inequities in oral health care persist.

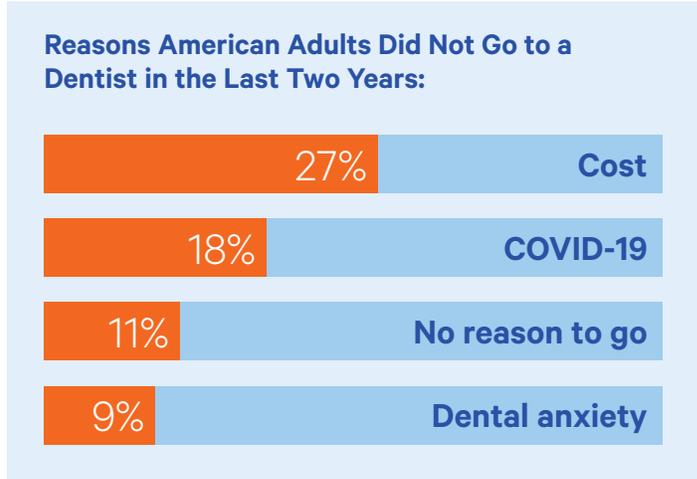
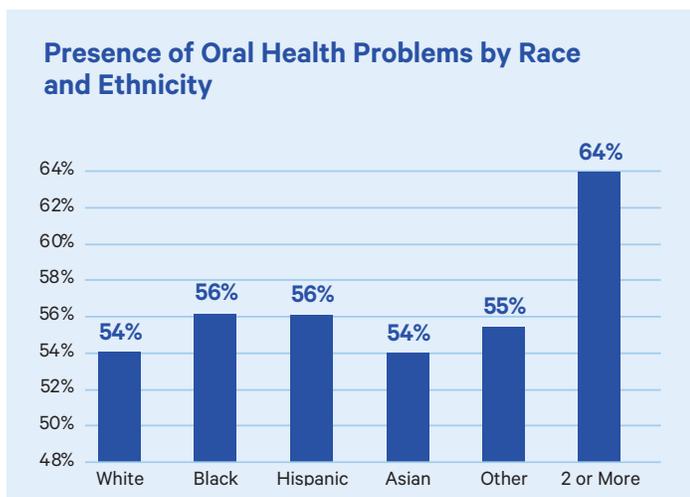
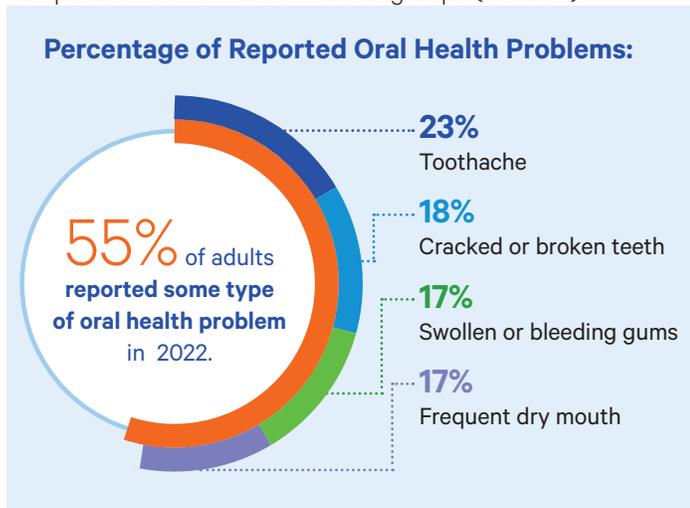
In 2022, CareQuest Institute for Oral Health conducted a second nationally representative survey of 5,682 adults as a follow-up to a similar study in 2021. The first survey identified [multiple troubling issues](#) emerging during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. Findings from the 2022 survey reveal that while some aspects of oral health have rebounded since the earlier stage of the pandemic, several inequities still exist. Results are reported from the 2022 survey unless otherwise noted.

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Oral Health and Access to Care

The number of adults saying they saw a dentist recently (less than six months ago) increased slightly, from 43% in 2021 to 46% in 2022. For those who had not seen an oral health provider in the last two years, 27% cited cost (down from 33% in 2021), 18% cited the COVID-19 pandemic (up from 6% in 2021), and 11% said they had no reason to go (down from 16% in 2021). The percentage of those avoiding care due to dental anxiety remained relatively consistent at 9% in 2022 and 10% in 2021.

More than half of adults (55%) reported some type of oral health problem in 2022, similar to the number of adults reporting such problems in 2021 (56%). In both years, toothache (23% in 2021 and 2022); cracked or broken teeth (20%; 18%); swollen or bleeding gums (18%; 17%); and frequent dry mouth (15%; 17%) were the most frequently cited dental problems. Individuals identifying as more than one race were the most likely to report an oral health problem (64%) compared with individuals in other groups (54–56%).



In both 2021 and 2022, more than half of adults with an oral health problem (56%) did not seek care from an oral health provider or emergency department (ED). In 2022, nearly one quarter of these adults could not afford to seek care for their oral health problem (24%, compared with 25% in 2021), while 14% were afraid of COVID-19 exposure (down from 22% in 2021).

The frequency of visits to an ED for an oral health problem remained stable from 2021 (3.9%) to 2022 (4.1%). Reliance on EDs for nontraumatic dental conditions is [costly and ineffective](#) for individuals and the health care system at large, and reflects lack of access to care among the most underserved members of the US population.

Approximately 4% of adults visit the ED for an oral health problem annually.

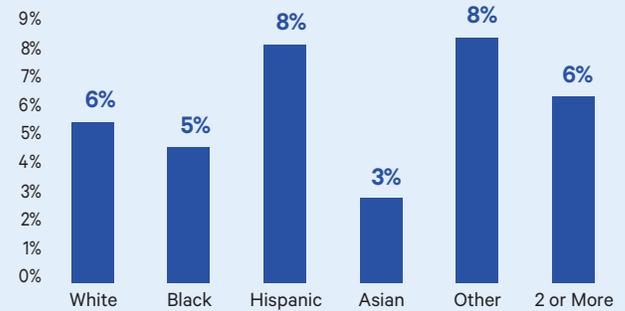
Adults also reported several conditions beneficial to oral health, including good oral home care, positive oral health beliefs, and a consistent dental home. Nearly all adults (94%) said they brush their teeth at least once per day; 55% said they brush at least twice per day. However, less than half of adults said they floss at least once per day (45%). These reports are very similar to those from 2021. In 2022, 76% of adults had a

dental home—that is, an office or clinic where they receive regular dental care (up slightly from 74% in 2021). Having a [primary care medical home](#) has been linked to more use of preventive services and less use of emergency services. While research on the [importance of dental homes](#) has focused on children, having a dental home as an adult holds the promise of similar benefits.

Avoidance of Oral Health Care Persists

The number of adults planning to see an oral health provider in the next year remained relatively stable from 2021 (83%) to 2022 (85%). Individuals identifying as Hispanic or as an “other” race were most likely to say they did not plan to see a dentist in the next year. For those not planning to visit an oral health provider in the coming year, fewer adults identified fear of COVID-19 exposure as a reason for avoiding care in 2022 (20%) than in 2021 (26%). While the number of adults citing lack of insurance as a reason to avoid future dental care decreased from 33% in 2021 to 29% in 2022, more adults identified cost as a reason to avoid care in 2022 (43%) than in 2021 (38%).

No Plans to See a Dentist in the Next Year by Race and Ethnicity

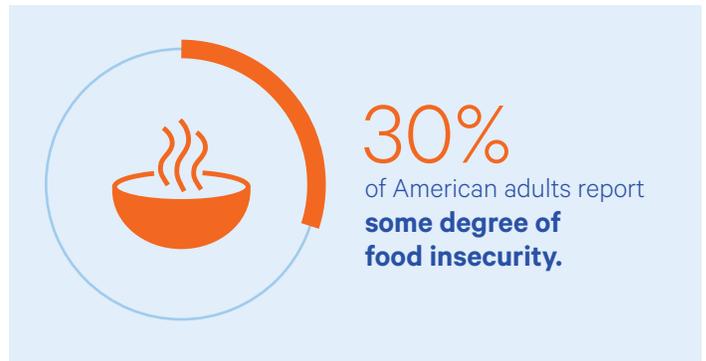


Financial Fallout Worsens Oral Health Outcomes

In 2022, 38% of adults who lost their dental insurance say this was due to a job loss or change in benefits related to COVID-19. In 2021, 65% of those who had lost their dental insurance reported some type of oral symptom like pain or swelling. In 2022, this number dropped slightly to 62%. Individuals identifying as Hispanic were most likely to say that they lost their dental insurance because of a job loss (57%), while adults identifying as Asian (26%) or an “other” race (30%) were most likely to say they lost dental insurance due to a change in benefits related to COVID-19.

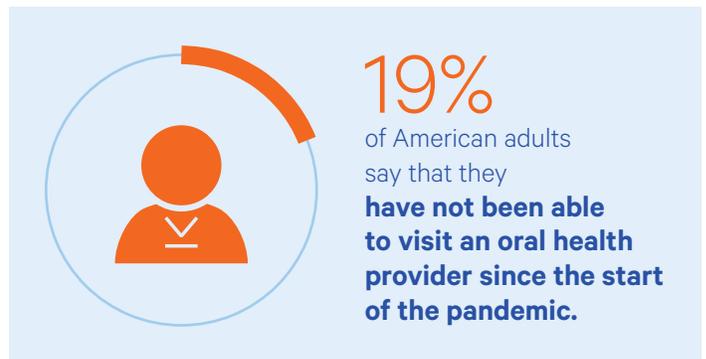
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During the year prior to the 2022 survey, 8% of adults reported having lost a job; an additional 9% were worried they would lose their current job. Nearly 7% missed a rent or mortgage payment, and 3% said they were threatened with foreclosure or eviction. An additional 2% experienced homelessness, and 30% reported some degree of [food insecurity](#) either “sometimes” or “often.” Individuals with low income are at [higher risk of untreated dental disease](#) such as dental decay, missing teeth, and traumatic dental injuries.



Continuing Impacts of Delays in Oral Care

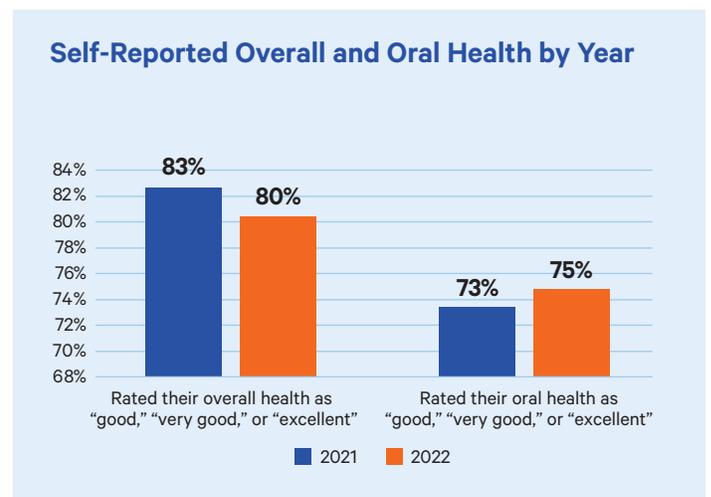
The number of adults who have had COVID-19 increased from 10% in January–February 2021 to 27% during the same months in 2022. In April 2020, the American Dental Association recommended that dental offices limit their appointments to [emergency-only procedures](#), requiring many patients to postpone nonurgent treatment. Fewer adults said they delayed their last dental appointment due to COVID-19 in 2022 (24%) compared to 2021 (38%). The decline in the number of adults postponing dental care due to COVID-19 in 2022 compared to 2021 likely reflects the return of dental offices to providing routine care. That said, 19% of adults reported that they have not been able to visit an oral health provider since the start of the pandemic. Meanwhile, a third of adults (35%)



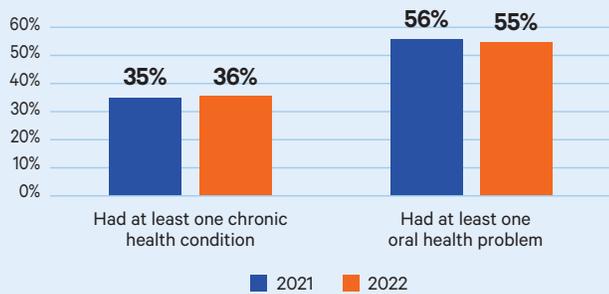
say that the pandemic made it difficult to visit an oral health provider for routine or preventive services, but that this is no longer a difficulty for them.

Oral Health and Overall Health

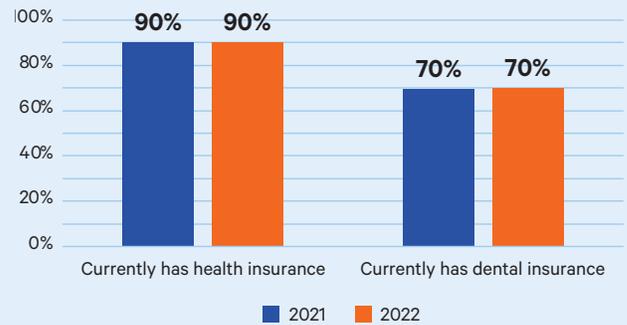
Adults consistently rate their overall health slightly better than their oral health. In both 2021 and 2022, more than 80% of adults said their overall health was “excellent,” “very good,” or “good.” When it came to rating their oral health, however, these numbers were 75% or lower for both years. As noted above, more than half of adults reported some type of oral health problem in 2021 and 2022. Meanwhile, only 36% of adults reported a chronic health condition in 2022 (35% in 2021). More adults also reported having health insurance (90%) than dental insurance (70%).



Presence of at Least One Chronic Health Condition and One Oral Health Problem by Year



Currently Has Health vs. Dental Insurance by Year



Conclusions

Since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, dental offices have reopened for routine and preventive care, and increasing vaccination rates have allowed many to return to a more normal way of life. However, results from this survey show that oral health inequities persist due to cost of care, lack of insurance, dental anxiety, and lingering fears of COVID-19 exposure. Despite the fact that nearly three quarters of adults rated their oral health as good or better, more than half of adults still experience oral health problems, with many unable to seek appropriate care to resolve these issues. While fear and anxiety related to dental care and COVID-19 continue to keep some away from the dental office, cost remains a persistent barrier to access for many adults.

The number of individuals seeking dental care in EDs remained stable across both surveys. Younger adults who have lower incomes and Medicaid dental coverage are more likely than other individuals to seek care for nontraumatic dental conditions through EDs. By increasing access to non-ED sources of dental care through expansion of Medicaid adult dental benefits, the US could save as much as [\\$1 billion annually](#) in ED visits for NTDCs. Further, overall health care costs could be reduced for conditions such as [diabetes](#), [cardiovascular disease](#), and [pregnancy complications](#) by increasing access to oral health care.

Access to care could also be increased by providing more [teledentistry](#) services, which were used throughout the pandemic to help [triage patient needs](#) and provide more

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effective treatment planning. Expanding the dental workforce through the use of mid-level providers such as expanded-function dental hygienists and dental therapists is another way to reduce barriers to dental care. [Integrating oral health into other health care settings](#), such as primary care, holds the promise of further expanding the oral health workforce and increasing access to care. Teledentistry and expanding the reach of the oral health workforce are ways in which the [broader oral health care system can be redesigned](#) to provide person-centered, value-based, and prevention-oriented care.

CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

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