

# Confronting the Burden of Dental Disease: Employers Hold Key to Lessening the Effects

## Dental in Depth

An Article Series for Producers

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Few people make it to adulthood without a cavity or two. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that 90 percent of all Americans over the age of 40 have experienced tooth decay. Add to that the people affected by gum disease, oral cancer and other dental problems, and it becomes apparent that oral health issues impact almost everyone at some time in their lives.

In 2007, Americans made about 500 million visits to dentists and an estimated \$98.6 billion was spent on dental services. Yet many children and adults still go without affordable access to dental care, creating physical, social and economic burdens on individuals, their employers and the healthcare system.

Dental benefits have proven to be one of the best ways to provide access to dental care. Individuals with dental coverage seek care more often and are less likely to have unmet dental needs than those without coverage.

When it comes to building benefits packages that benefit nearly all employees and their dependents, and which also have a proven track record of improving oral and overall health, it's clear that dental benefits deliver.

### More Than a Healthy Mouth

Oral health is important in its own right, but researchers are finding that it might also be associated with the incidence, diagnosis and management of other systemic conditions.

Sometimes the early signs of a disease are visible to dentists when patients open wide. For example, people with lesions or sores inside their mouths may be suffering from viral infections in their lungs. Similarly, unpleasantly sensitive teeth or teeth that show chemical erosion of the hard enamel surface may indicate acid reflux or hiatal hernia problems, conditions where sufferers repeatedly burp bile into their mouths.

In other cases, researchers have found the state of a patient's oral health to have associations with a number of systemic conditions, such as diabetes and circulatory problems.

Research studies document that periodontal disease is more common among people with diabetes. Almost one-third of people with diabetes also have severe periodontal disease. Periodontal disease progresses more rapidly and is more difficult to treat in people with uncontrolled or poorly controlled diabetes than in people without diabetes.

Other studies have found that patients with periodontal disease, and often fewer teeth as a result, had an increased risk of suffering a stroke, caused by a lack of adequate blood supply to the brain.

While we're beginning to understand that the mouth can be a reflection of our overall health and well being, the challenges of oral disease remain. The burden that oral diseases place on the population could be greatly reduced, or even eliminated, with appropriate access to dental care, a focus on oral disease prevention and continued scientific research.

### Beyond the Smile

Beyond the physical affects of poor oral health, employers and employees face other serious ramifications.

For individuals without dental benefits, an oral health issue can cause an unexpected financial hit. A dental problem can also affect some of the most basic physical functions, such as speaking and chewing, ultimately impacting social interaction and nutrition. Additionally, oral health issues can have social implications. Those suffering from dental illnesses often report a loss of self-esteem, depression and anxiety. In children, oral disease is sometimes even to blame for poor academic performance.

In the workplace, employers can also feel the sting of poor oral health. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that over 164 million work hours and 51 million school hours are lost each year due to oral health issues. These figures do not even account for loss of school and work hours due to other chronic problems such as diabetes, which may be linked to oral disease.

What's even harder to swallow is that much of the burden of oral disease could be eliminated by something as simple as better prevention. A study

published in Public Health Reports states that every dollar spent on prevention saves an estimated \$4 in future treatment and restoration costs, and that the U.S. could save \$4 billion annually through better preventive dental care, early detection, and treatment.

### **Lifting the Burden**

So if preventive care is clearly the answer, why does oral disease remain so prevalent today? The answer lies in the access individuals have to adequate dental care. According to the “Surgeon General’s Report on Oral Health,” one of the greatest barriers to this access is a lack of resources to pay for care.

Employers, with the help of the brokers and consultants who counsel them, can improve the state of oral health and reap the resulting benefits of doing so by:

- Communicating the physical and financial implications of poor oral health
- Proposing dental benefit programs that cover preventive services, with minimal cost to employees
- Encouraging employees to maintain relationships with dentists for ongoing care
- Assisting companies with value-added programs such as health fairs and educational presentations
- Monitoring the effectiveness of dental benefits, ensuring they meet employee needs

### **Something to Smile About**

As a not-for-profit organization, it’s our mission is to lessen the burden of oral disease by removing barriers to help effective prevention and treatment. For more information about how we can help you and your clients can develop dental benefits programs that meet their needs, contact a Delta Dental representative.