The 2026 State of America's Oral Health and Wellness Report

COMMISSIONED BY DELTA DENTAL PLANS ASSOCIATION

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Table of contents

Foreword from James W. Hutchison, President & CEO, Delta Dental Plans Association 3

Adults view oral health as an essential part of overall health 4-5

Gen Z spotlight: Deepening understanding of the oral-overall health connection 6

Daily hygiene habits continue to anchor adults' oral health 7

Children's spotlight: Marked improvements in oral health 8-9

Preventive dental visits rise as adults prioritize long-term oral health 10-11

Key drivers of dental visit anxiety ease over last year 12

Dental insurance empowers preventive care and strengthens financial well-being 13-15

About the research 16

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Foreword from James W. Hutchison

President & CEO, Delta Dental Plans Association

Oral health is essential to overall well-being, and the *2026 State of America's Oral Health and Wellness Report* offers timely insight into how this is shaping perceptions and action nationwide.

Now in its sixth year, the annual report commissioned by Delta Dental examines the oral and overall health behaviors and views of adults and children nationwide, revealing meaningful progress and important opportunities.

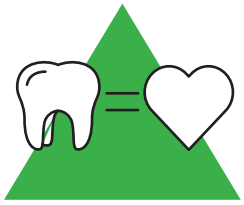
This year's findings reflect that families are prioritizing strong at-home oral health routines and regular dental visits, showing broad appreciation for the critical role that oral heath plays in lifelong wellness. Awareness of the connection between oral health and broader physical health is also expanding, with younger adults showing notable year-over-year gains in understanding as to how oral health relates to chronic conditions.

The report further underscores the essential role that dental benefits play in supporting these behaviors. Adults with dental benefits are significantly more likely to seek preventive care and report meaningful financial support, including lower out-of-pocket costs and greater affordability—reinforcing how dental coverage reduces barriers to care while enabling proactive, preventive approaches to oral health.

As the nation's leading dental benefits provider and oral health philanthropist, Delta Dental remains committed to advancing access, education, and prevention. Through continued research, advocacy, and leadership, we are dedicated to elevating oral health as a vital pillar of lifelong wellness for communities nationwide.

Adults view oral health as an essential part of overall health

In 2026, the connection between oral health and overall wellness remains firmly established, with **91% of adults agreeing that oral health is very or extremely important to their overall health**, highlighting a powerful and enduring consensus.



This understanding is influencing behavior in meaningful ways. A growing share of adults now view **preventive dental exams as just as important as an annual physical exam** (90% in 2026 vs. 87% in 2025), reflecting a stronger alignment between oral health and broader preventive health habits. Among parents, this belief is even more pronounced: 95% say their child's oral health is a top priority, underscoring the role families play in supporting lifelong oral health routines.

Adults' understanding of oral health is also deepening, expanding beyond daily routines to encompass its connection to broader physical health conditions. This year, awareness of these relationships increased across several chronic illnesses, including:

Kidney disease
28% in 2026
(vs. 22% in 2025)

Diabetes
32% in 2026
(vs. 27% in 2025)

Dementia
25% in 2026
(vs. 20% in 2025)

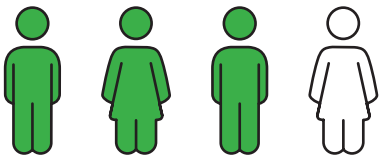
Chronic lung disease
27% in 2026
(vs. 23% in 2025)

> It's important that patients understand that the health of their teeth and gums impacts their whole body. We encourage patients not only to see their dentists routinely, but also to take care of their teeth and gums between those visits to combat elevated risks of systemic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes from the chronic inflammation of periodontal disease, and the impacts that tooth decay or oral pain can have on nutrition or even self-esteem. But it's even more important, as health care professionals, that we recognize the connection between oral health and total body health and provide patients with holistic health care experiences.

Daniel Croley, DMD
Vice President and Chief Dental Officer,
Delta Dental of California and Affiliates

Oral health and mental well-being

Beyond physical health, oral health plays a meaningful role in adults' emotional and psychological wellness.



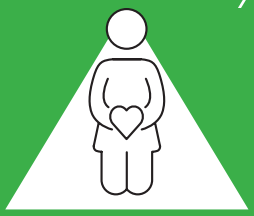
Nearly 3 in 4 adults (71%)

say oral health is essential to their mental well-being, reflecting a stable and widely shared belief.

Additionally, **nearly two-thirds (64%)** cite their teeth and gums as a source of personal pride, emphasizing the role a healthy smile plays in confidence, self-presentation, and overall emotional health.

Rising confidence in personal oral health

Adults' perceptions of their oral health are improving. This year, **40% of adults rate their oral health as "good" or "excellent,"** up from 36% in 2025. This year-over-year increase suggests growing confidence in the steps adults are taking to care for their oral health.



Oral health plays a key role in prenatal wellness

53% of adults say oral health is an essential part of prenatal care.

Among women who have experienced pregnancy:

- 35% say pregnancy increases the risk of periodontal (gum) disease.
- 31% recognize gum disease can contribute to adverse pregnancy outcomes, up from 26% in 2025.

These findings underscore the importance of maintaining strong oral health habits to support a healthy pregnancy.

GEN Z
▶ SPOTLIGHT ◀

Gen Z is deepening their understanding of the oral-overall health connection

In the past year, the share of Gen Z adults who consider their oral health as very or extremely important to their overall health rose significantly from **89% in 2025 to 94% in 2026,** reflecting a growing appreciation for how oral health influences whole-body well-being.

Gen Z is increasingly recognizing the link between oral health and chronic physical conditions, with awareness rising across several illnesses, including:

Kidney disease
40% in 2026
(vs. 23% in 2025)

Dementia
37% in 2026
(vs. 20% in 2025)

Diabetes
43% in 2026
(vs. 28% in 2025)

Gen Z increasingly views oral care as an essential part of self-care

Beyond physical health, Gen Z continues to embrace the idea that maintaining their oral health is key to supporting their mental well-being. Many connect oral health to confidence, self-presentation, and overall emotional wellness, reinforcing the role a healthy smile plays in overall self-care.

Gen Z agrees that protecting oral health is closely connected to mental health

Confidence in Gen Z's oral health is rising—and reshaping expectations of care

48%
rate their oral health positively
(vs. 31% in 2025)

89%
say dental visits are as essential as physicals
(vs. 75% in 2025)

Daily hygiene habits continue to anchor adults' oral health

At-home habits remain the foundation of oral health for many adults. Adults continue to brush, floss, and rinse at rates nearly identical to last year, with the majority following recommended guidelines.

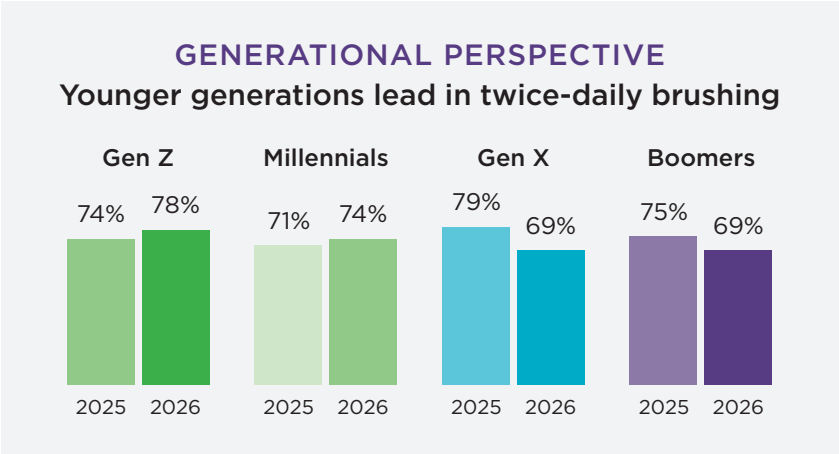
72%
brushing 2x per day
(vs. 74% in 2025)

73%
flossing 1x per day
(vs. 71% in 2025)

68%
using mouthwash 1x per day
(vs. 66% in 2025)

Younger adults are leading a shift in brushing discipline

Interestingly, younger adults are adopting more consistent twice-daily brushing routines, creating a clear generational gap in 2026.



Opportunities remain to strengthen at-home habits

Despite generally steady routines, opportunities persist to improve at-home care. Only **55% of adults follow the recommended three-month toothbrush replacement cycle.**

Among those who do not, replacement tends to be reactive—driven by forgetfulness (46%), waiting until the bristles appear worn (42%), or simply not purchasing a new toothbrush during routine shopping (30%).

"Strong daily oral hygiene habits are the foundation of lifelong oral health. While routine preventive dental visits are essential, they typically represent just two hours a year, leaving the remaining 8,758 hours to be shaped by everyday choices and behaviors. Consistent twice-daily brushing, flossing, and rinsing at home play a critical role in reducing plaque and inflammation, preventing cavities and gum disease, and protecting long-term oral health."

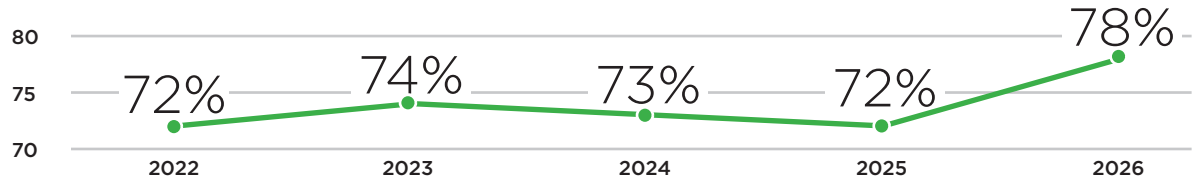
Teri Barichello, DMD
Vice President and Chief Dental Officer,
Delta Dental of Oregon and Alaska

CHILDREN'S
▶ SPOTLIGHT ◀

Marked improvements in children's oral health

Parents are reporting notable improvements in their children's oral health. In 2026, **more than 3 in 4 parents (78%) rated their child's oral health as "good" or "excellent," the highest level in five years.** This upward trend reflects growing attention to healthy habits at home.

Parents rating their child's oral health as "good" or "excellent"



Improvements in children's oral health are likely tied to marked gains in daily habits compared to last year, with more children following recommended routines:

75%
brushing 2x per day
(vs. 67% in 2025)

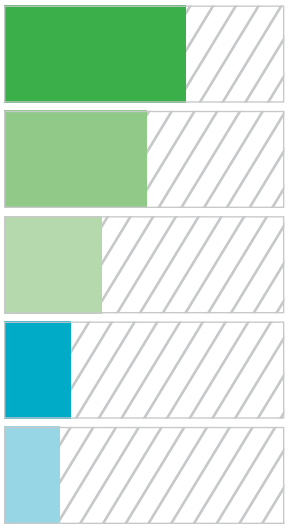
64%
flossing 1x per day
(vs. 50% in 2025)

60%
using mouthwash 1x per day
(vs. 46% in 2025)

Parents are using creative strategies to keep healthy habits on track

Even with these improvements, **53% of parents** admit they still struggle at times to get their child to brush regularly. To keep habits on track, many rely on tools that make brushing more fun or rewarding.

Parent-reported tools for encouraging effective oral health habits



65% **Rewards/incentives**

51% **Well-known characters teaching them proper oral health care habits**

35% **Books about proper oral health care habits (e.g., brushing, flossing)**

24% **Songs/dances**

20% **Teachers/school**

When parents use a reward system to support their child's oral health, they do so most often for good reports from the dentist (76%) and well-behaved dental visits (73%).

Parent-reported rewards for proper oral health care

69%
Toys

65%
Activities

37%
Money

35%
Food

CHILDREN'S SPOTLIGHT

Parents remain consistent in prioritizing dental visits

Among children who visited the dentist in 2025, preventive visits remained high at 90%, though slightly down from 94% in 2024. These visits provide access to key preventive services, such as professionally applied fluoride treatments, that offer an added layer of protection against cavities.

Unexpected visits increased to 18% in 2025, up from 13% in 2024, but remain relatively uncommon overall.

When children experience unexpected dental issues, the impact often extends beyond oral health. Parents report increased disruptions to daily life, including missed activities, schedule changes, and emotional stress.

28%
of families had to cancel or miss something
(vs. 20% in 2025)

67%
of parents are concerned dental issues will impact their child's confidence in their appearance
(vs. 61% in 2025)

A significant knowledge gap persists around early dental care

Although parents overwhelmingly understand the benefits of early dental care—**85% say early visits provide peace of mind and help establish healthy habits**—only **27%** are aware of the recommended timing for a child's first dental visit **(within six months of the first tooth appearing or by age 1).** This gap highlights a critical opportunity for education and outreach.

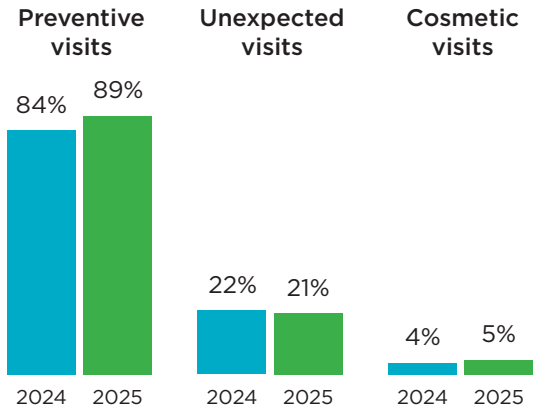
"A child's first dental visit by age 1 is a critical step in protecting their long-term oral health. These early visits help families establish healthy habits from the very beginning and give dentists the opportunity to provide essential preventive care, such as professionally applied fluoride, that strengthens developing teeth. Starting early can significantly reduce the risk of cavities and prevent small issues from becoming bigger problems later."

Jason Grinter, DDS, MPH
Vice President, Dental Science & Network Strategy,
Delta Dental of Illinois

Preventive dental visits rise as adults prioritize long-term oral health

Adults continue to prioritize preventive oral health care. In 2025, nearly 6 in 10 adults (57%) visited the dentist. Among those who did, a greater share sought preventive care compared to 2024, signaling a growing commitment to long-term oral health.

Types of dental visits made by adults who visited the dentist



Adults seek preventive oral health care for several reasons, including cost savings and a belief that preventive dental care is the best defense against serious, and often costly, dental issues in the future.

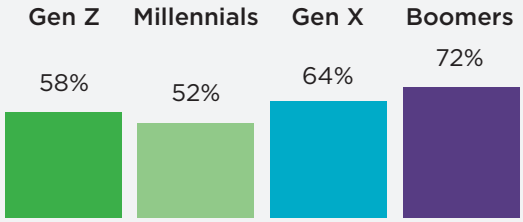
Top reasons for seeking preventive oral care

90%
agree that addressing oral health issues can save them money in the long term

62%
say they prioritize preventive dental care as the best defense against serious—and often costly—dental issues in the future

GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

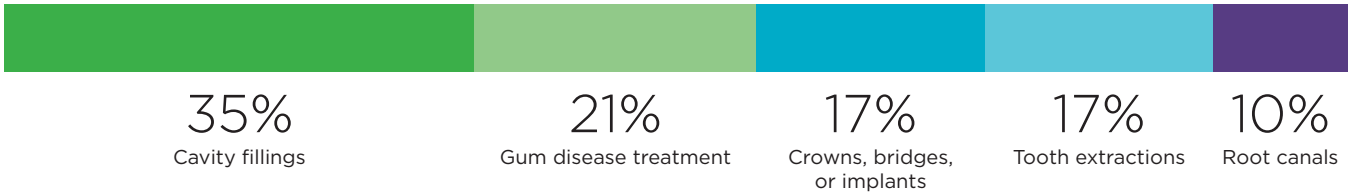
Gen X and Boomers are more likely to believe preventive dental visits reduce the risk of serious dental issues



Even with strong preventive habits, dental issues still occur

In 2025, approximately 1 in 5 adults (21%) experienced dental issues. Cavity fillings were the most common treatment, and younger adults were more likely to report needing them (43% Gen Z, 40% Millennials, 29% Gen X, 29% Boomers).

Most common dental treatments of 2025 among those who visited the dentist

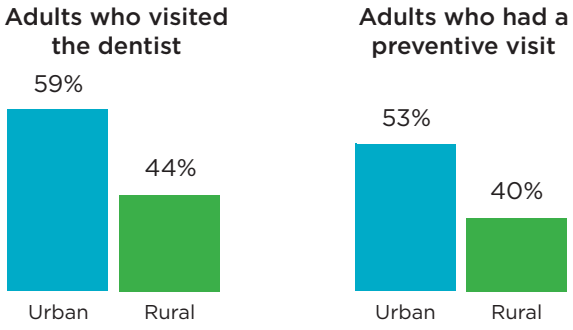


Barriers to care persist despite strong interest in prevention

Access to dental care remains a challenge for many adults, with financial constraints and dental-related anxiety continuing to be key obstacles to timely care.

Adults in urban areas have a geographic advantage, with greater dentist availability contributing to more frequent dental visits than in rural areas.

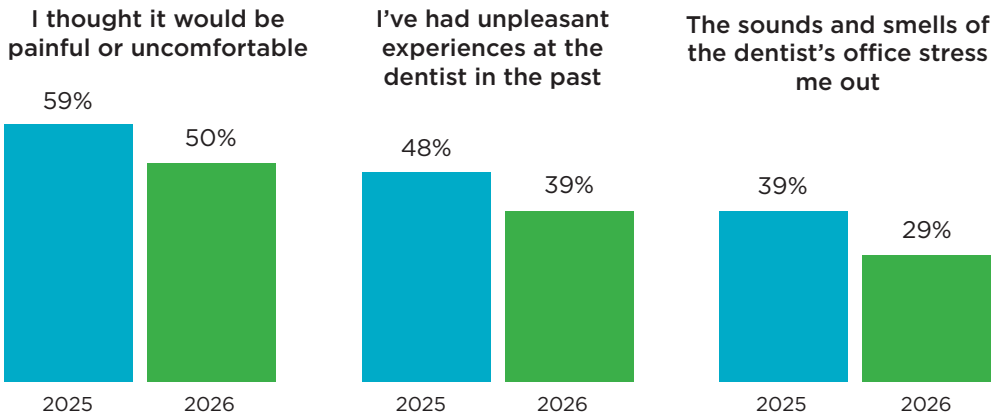
Dental and preventive care visits in 2025 (Urban vs. Rural)



Key drivers of dental visit anxiety ease over last year

One of the notable trends this year is the **decline in the intensity of key dental anxiety triggers.** While **approximately 1 in 5 adults (20%) and children (21%)** continue to experience some level of dental anxiety, the primary sources of that stress are becoming less severe than last year. Among adults who report dental anxiety, concerns related to potential discomfort and financial costs remain the leading drivers; however, meaningful year-over-year decreases are observed across several specific stressors.

Among adults with dental anxiety, key triggers are easing



Adults identify what would make dental visits more comfortable

As these stressors ease, adults with a history of dental anxiety are also clear about what would further improve their experience. Their top requests focus on a mix of **administrative efficiency** and **personalized, in-visit comfort options,** including:

35%
Shorter wait times

34%
Noise-canceling headphones

33%
Streaming media options

These preferences reinforce that small environmental and operational enhancements can meaningfully improve the dental visit experience and provide comfort for patients who struggle with anxiety.

Dental insurance empowers preventive care and strengthens financial well-being

For most adults, dental insurance is far more than a way to cover bills—it is a **critical safeguard for both oral and overall health.** It also plays an important role in supporting everyday wellness and financial security.

Health & behavior benefits

- **82%** say dental insurance is essential to protecting oral and overall health
- **85%** report that having coverage encourages more consistent oral health habits

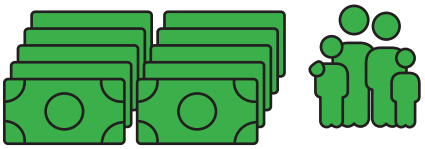
Financial benefits

- **84%** say their coverage saves them money in the long run
- **80%** credit their plan with providing lower, pre-negotiated discounts on services

Adults with dental insurance also report **significant annual savings** that help shield them from the full cost of care. This financial protection is especially meaningful for families, who benefit from negotiated rates on services and preventive coverage that can substantially reduce out-of-pocket expenses.

Estimated median annual savings for those with dental insurance

$350
for an individual



$1,000
for a family of four

> Dental benefits are a cornerstone of preventive oral health and long-term wellness, empowering individuals to engage in regular dental care and early, evidence-based intervention. With early detection and timely care, coverage supports better health outcomes and can help stop minor issues from turning into more complex and costly conditions. Embracing preventive dental care not only preserves oral health, but also strengthens overall health, reduces avoidable complications, and supports a higher quality of life over time.

Linda Vidone, DMD
Vice President Clinical Management,
Chief Clinical Officer,
Delta Dental of Massachusetts

Dental insurance also encourages proactive care

Beyond financial protection, dental insurance plays a pivotal role in shaping preventive behaviors. Adults with dental insurance were **significantly more likely to make a preventive visit** in 2025 compared with those without coverage.

This behavioral impact is critical, as regular preventive care helps reduce the likelihood of avoidable, costly dental complications over time.

Preventive and diagnostic services are typically covered at 100% for in-network dentists, reducing a key barrier and encouraging consistency in routine care.

Adults who made a preventive visit to the dentist in 2025

65%
with dental insurance

32%
without dental insurance

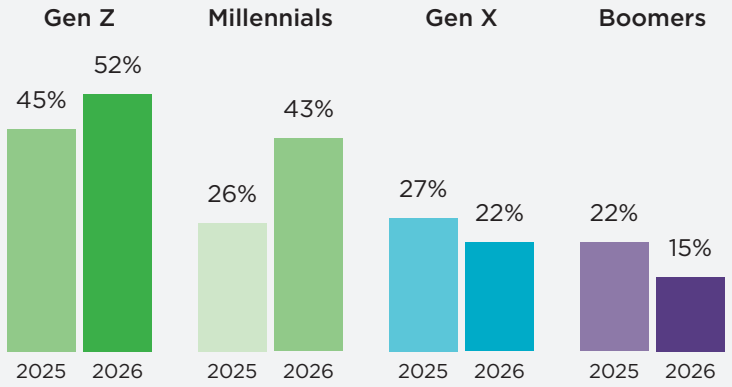
Interest in enrollment is rising—especially among younger adults

The value of dental insurance is increasingly recognized among uninsured adults. This year, 1 in 3 (33%) uninsured adults plan to obtain dental coverage in the coming year—a notable increase from 28% in 2025.

Younger adults are driving much of this momentum, with the highest intent to enroll in the next 12 months.

GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Younger generations are more likely to enroll in dental insurance in the next 12 months



Looking ahead

The 2026 findings underscore that oral health has become a vital pillar of total wellness—**deeply connected to physical, mental, and financial stability.** This holistic mindset is contributing to more consistent proactive behaviors, with adults and families embracing strong at-home routines, prioritizing preventive dental visits, and strengthening their understanding of how oral health shapes whole-body well-being. Central to this progress is dental insurance, which encourages preventive care and delivers meaningful financial protection, ultimately transforming oral health into a trusted pathway to long-term vitality.

About the research

Delta Dental Plans Association commissioned a third-party market research firm, Material Holdings, LLC, to undertake research that formed the basis for this report. Material conducted its research between January 5 and January 15, 2026, using an email invitation and online surveys of audiences recruited through an opt-in panel:

- 1,000 nationally representative U.S. adults ages 18+
- 1,000 parents of children ages 12 and under

Geographic distribution quotas were set to ensure a reliable and accurate representation of the U.S. population of adults and parents with children ages 12 and under. Research in this report has a margin of error of +/- 3%.

The generational categories referred to in this report are defined by the following:

- Gen Z: individuals born between 1997 and 2008
- Millennials: individuals born between 1981 and 1996
- Gen X: individuals born between 1965 and 1980
- Boomers: individuals born between 1946 and 1964

About Delta Dental Plans Association

Based in Chicago, Illinois, Delta Dental Plans Association is the not-for-profit national association of the 39 independent Delta Dental companies. Through these companies, Delta Dental is the nation's largest dental benefits provider and offers the country's largest dental network with approximately 151,000 participating dentists. As the nation's leading oral health philanthropist, Delta Dental companies and their foundations have invested more than $2.3 billion over the last 15 years to improve the oral and overall health of our communities.

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