

Oral Health in Duval County

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Oral health is essential to general health and well-being. Sound oral health enhances one's ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, chew, and swallow. Poor or impaired oral health not only can impact diet and nutrition, but also can influence social activities such as school and work. Although safe and effective approaches to achieving and maintaining oral health have been available and have benefited the majority of Americans for more than a half century, many persons still experience needless pain, discomfort, and complications that affect overall health and well-being and bring about financial and social costs borne by both individuals and society. Systemic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, and low birth weight are associated with poor oral health. Also, many systemic diseases and conditions exhibit oral manifestations, which may be early signs of clinical disease.¹⁻³

The most prevalent oral health conditions are dental caries (tooth decay) and periodontal diseases (infections involving gum and/or supporting bone). Dental caries is the most common chronic disease in children, five times more common than asthma, and individuals are susceptible to the disease throughout their lifetime.^{1,4} If dental conditions such as caries and periodontal diseases go untreated, they can develop into chronic infections requiring more complex and costly treatment and can result in increased morbidity and mortality. Therefore, physicians and other clinicians should be familiar with such oral diseases, approaches to their prevention, and the need for their patients to obtain regular, professional dental care.

Unmet needs for oral health care by individuals and families not having a regular source of oral healthcare frequently result in inappropriate use of emergency departments (ED) at hospitals for oral health problems. The Duval County Health Department recently completed a report on oral health using mainly secondary data. During 2006, there were 6,816 ED visits for dental-related conditions in Duval County, and of those, 6,445 (95%) were for dental conditions considered to be ambulatory care sensitive conditions (ACSCs).⁵ These are conditions for which appropriate outpatient care can potentially prevent the need for hospitalization, or for which early intervention can prevent complications or more severe disease.⁶ The ED visit rate for dental ACSCs in 2006 was much higher for blacks than for whites (1,057.25 per 100,000 versus 613.94 per 100,000). The urban core (Health Zone 1*) had the highest percentage of ED visits for dental ACSC's and had the highest rate of oral cancer deaths from 1997-2007.^{5,7,8}

Profound disparities in oral health exist racially, geographically, by gender and socioeconomic status in Florida, and in Duval County, as they do throughout the country. Individuals who experience the worst oral health are found among the poor of all ages. Poor children and older Americans are particularly vulnerable.¹ According to the latest available data (2004 BRFSS) for Florida, more than one in three persons did not visit the dentist or a dental clinic within the past year. For individuals whose reported annual income was less than \$15,000, nearly 60 percent had not done so.⁹ The age-adjusted death rate from oral and pharyngeal cancer in Florida was higher for black males (5.5 per 100,000) than for white males (4.2 per 100,000; aggregated data, 2001-2005).¹⁰ Specifically in Northeast Florida,** from 2001-2005, there were 112 deaths among white males and 26 deaths among black males resulting from oral and pharyngeal cancer. The age-adjusted death rate for males of all races (5.4 per 100,000) from this disease was much higher than for females (1.8 per 100,000).¹¹

Primary approaches to prevention of dental caries include community water fluoridation, use of a fluoride-containing dentifrice, and placement of dental sealants. Primary prevention of periodontal diseases includes daily toothbrushing and dental flossing, which may be augmented by antimicrobial mouthrinses available over-the-counter and by prescription.^{1,12} In Duval County, over 99% of the population served by community water systems has available naturally fluoridated drinking water.¹³ Duval County Health Department Dental Program staff provides a large number of preventive and treatment services for children at four fixed dental clinics and on two mobile dental units.

Lack of access to dental care is widespread, and it has been estimated more than 100 million Americans lack dental insurance. Even those who do have insurance may find it difficult to locate a provider who accepts their insurance, as is often the case for many Medicaid clients. Less than 10 percent of dentists within Florida had filed at least one Medicaid program claim for services rendered during 2008.⁹

To meet the challenge of increasing access to dental care for needy families in Duval County, particularly with regard to the need for early intervention to prevent dental caries in children, healthcare professionals must work cooperatively to increase oral health literacy of parents and decision makers, and the public's understanding of the importance of oral health. In addition, we should enhance opportunities for underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities in the dental workforce, achieve greater integration of oral and general health programs, and promote better collaboration among public agencies and private health organizations, private practitioners, and various health disciplines.¹⁴

* The urban core of Jacksonville includes zip codes 32202, 32204, 32206, 32208, 32209, and 32254.

** Northeast Florida includes Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau, and St. Johns counties.

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