Oral Health of Older Adults

Primary Care: Quick Facts

- Compared with other age groups, older adults have less access to oral care services and poorer oral health status.
  - 30% visited a dentist compared to 88% visited a physician annually;
  - 75% of senior men and 83% of senior women have no dental insurance;
  - Many standard dental treatment options are invasive, complex, expensive and often, not available to non-ambulatory older adults living independently; and
  - Up to 90% of older adults don’t perceive the need for dental care.

- Nearly 7% of all health expenditures are for oral health care, ranking 2nd in diagnostic categories behind cardiovascular care and exceeding mental health, cancer, diabetes and pulmonary diseases.

- Research has shown the important link between oral disease and systemic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and respiratory diseases,
  - Oral diseases are progressive and cumulative if untreated and become more complex over time, and
  - Poor oral health is an important contributing factor to involuntary weight loss.

- Oral disease, pain and dysfunction can have an acute impact on the quality of life of older adults, affecting their chewing, eating, speaking, self-esteem, health, social interactions and relationships.

- More older adults are retaining a greater percentage of their natural teeth than those of previous generations.
  - Tooth decay is more than 3 times greater for older adults than for those under 45 years and exceeded tooth decay rates of adolescents;
  - Older adults with tooth decay and oral pain have compromised chewing, possibly causing them to try to swallow larger amounts of food and inadvertently aspirate; and
  - Denture-wearers frequently report that nothing is wrong with their uncomfortable dentures because such discomfort has become an accepted part of aging.

- More than 400 medications commonly used by older adults especially those used for chronic conditions can result in a dry mouth, which can lead to oral infections and tooth decay.

- Oral cancer has a high mortality rate with the 5-year survival rate is below 50%. If detected early, the 5-year survival increases dramatically to 80%.

- Oral health of older adults with dementia declines as their dementia progresses, due to poor oral hygiene and reliance on others.

- End-of-life oral care treatments need to focus on improving oral comfort and be consistent with the older adult’s end-of-life care wishes.

References and resources: [www.rgpc.ca](http://www.rgpc.ca)

Primary Care Oral Health of Older Adults Resource Kit

2008 September  ML van der Horst, D Scott & D Bowes