

Older and Wiser: National dental care plan great news for Canadian seniors

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Oral health is essential as we age, and a national dental plan would help low-income seniors afford good care

Good oral health is essential for seniors. A new national dental care program would be welcome news for seniors who are currently not able to afford proper care. photo Getty Images

Recently there was a welcome announcement from the federal government about plans for the creation of a national dental care program for low-income Canadians.

While it appears the plan will take some time to roll out, this is good news for many seniors who require good oral care. Unfortunately, many are not able to achieve the goal of good oral health because of financial issues. Now many seniors will be able to access the new plan because they are on or below the financial threshold.

Good oral health is important at all stages of life, but especially for older adults and seniors who are living longer and are also keeping their teeth longer than ever before. Good oral health is important to our overall well-being.

Good oral hygiene can help prevent the development of lung infections such as pneumonia. It can prevent gum disease which can damage the gum and bone that hold your teeth in place and may lead to painful chewing problems. In cases of severe gum disease, some people may lose their teeth which can lower self-esteem and reduce social interactions. We know that social isolation is related to serious negative health effects and a reduced quality of life for seniors.

Gum disease may increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. Poor oral health may increase the number of harmful bacteria found in the mouth, which may release toxins into the blood that can damage heart tissue.

Overall poor oral health is associated with a lower quality of life, according to information posted on the [Canadian Dental Association](#) website.

“With a healthy mouth you can eat, speak, and smile in comfort, which helps you feel physically, socially, and mentally well,” the CDA states. “A healthy mouth helps you enjoy life.”

Keeping up our oral health is important as we age, so how do we do that? The Canadian Dental Association suggest five ways to achieve good oral health. They suggest keeping your mouth clean, which includes brushing and flossing at least twice daily. You could also use a mouthwash and water pick. They suggest checking your mouth consistently for gum disease or gum cancer.

They suggest sticking to a good diet by eating a wide variety of healthy food and keeping your sugar and carbohydrates down to a minimum. For good dental health, half your plate should be made up of fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables contain water and fibre as well as vitamins A and C, which are all important for gum health and building enamel. Lean cuts of protein are rich in phosphorus, a mineral that protects and rebuilds tooth enamel.

The CDA also suggests limiting the use of alcohol and avoiding smoking and vaping. Finally, they suggest seeing your dentist and/or dental hygienist regularly.

As the CDA states, seeing a dentist regularly is part of a good oral health plan. But affording good dental care is a strain for many families. In the federal plan announced last month, children under 12 would be eligible starting later this year, but by 2023 the coverage would include 18-year-olds, seniors, and people living with disabilities. The program would be fully implemented by 2025, giving access to free dental care to the 6.5 million citizens currently going without. The financial threshold for accessing the plan is an annual income of \$90,000 per family. Dental fees would be fully covered by the government for any person or family with an income of less than \$70,000.

I think this will make an incredible difference in the lives of seniors who do not have coverage and cannot afford dental care. Research has shown that many seniors go without dental care – for some, making a choice between buying their medications and other necessary items or dentistry is a struggle, and paying for dentistry often loses.

For some seniors without dental coverage, when they experience an emergency or major dental issue, they often turn to hospital emergency rooms. This has a huge impact on the health care system both in terms of resources and time.

The Canadian Dental Association says that “48 per cent of Canadians who haven't seen a dentist in the past year have gum disease. Regular dental exams and professional cleanings are the best way to prevent and detect problems before they get worse.”

The hope is that with this new initiative we can improve oral health for seniors and others. And that is some good news to chew on.

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