

RESEARCH BRIEF

The Push to Add Dental Coverage to Medicare

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Methodology:

The State of Oral Health Equity in America 2021 is a nationally representative survey of consumer and patient attitudes, experiences, and behaviors related to oral health. It was designed by CareQuest Institute for Oral Health®. The survey was administered in January and February 2021, to adults aged 18 and older, by NORC at the University of Chicago as part of the AmeriSpeak panel. AmeriSpeak is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Randomly selected U.S. households were sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. Sampled households were contacted by U.S. mail, telephone, and field interviewers. A sampling unit of 16,986 was used with a final sample size of 5,320, with a final weighted cumulative response rate of 5.2%. All data presented account for appropriate sample weight.

Key Findings



- **94%** of those surveyed supported adding a dental benefit to Medicare.
- **Adding a dental benefit to Medicare has wide support** from both major political parties, medical and dental insurance groups, and consumers.
- Those with unmet oral health needs are **more likely to express interest in adding a dental benefit to Medicare.**

With current estimates projecting the population of adults age 65 and older in the United States to nearly double, from 52 million in 2018 to 95 million in 2060, we will see an overwhelming increase in the utilization of Medicare services. The aging of the US population creates an unprecedented need to address the oral health of older individuals, as the survey information below shows.

Most Medicare enrollees don't have access to oral health care because the national health insurance program doesn't include a dental benefit. While some are fortunate to have limited dental coverage through additional sources such as Medicare Advantage plans, [the majority of Medicare recipients](#) have not been so fortunate.

[Unmet dental needs](#) in aging adults can lead to oral-systemic complications, such as dry mouth, root and coronal caries (which can be recurrent), periodontitis, and difficulty eating due to poorly fitting dentures. Many Medicare beneficiaries, particularly those residing in long-term care facilities, are at high risk for oral complications due to chronic disease conditions. Without adequate dental care, the overall health of these individuals suffers. Not only do they often go without care, but if they do access dental services, they are paying for those services out-of-pocket. According to a recent [Kaiser Family Foundation report](#), the average out-of-pocket spending on dental services among Medicare beneficiaries who received any dental services was \$874 in 2018, with one in five Medicare beneficiaries (20%) spending more than \$1,000 out-of-pocket for dental services.

In January and February 2021, CareQuest Institute for Oral Health conducted a nationally representative survey to examine consumer attitudes, experiences, and behaviors related to oral health. The survey, which was completed by 5,320 adults, asked for input about adding a dental benefit to Medicare. Although many of the survey participants were unsure if Medicare covered dental services, over 90% agreed that dental should be a covered service. These results showed a strong consensus that a dental benefit should be added to all Medicare plans.

Those with the largest unmet needs and poorest oral health are indicating the highest need for expanded care coverage. Survey respondents who had at least one unmet oral health need, such as a cracked tooth or swollen/bleeding gums, were 2.5% more likely to agree that Medicare should cover dental services, and those who rated their oral health as poor were 4.5% more likely to agree than those who rated their oral health as excellent.

Adding a dental benefit to Medicare has wide support from major political parties, medical and dental insurance groups, and consumers of all races. More than 80% of all racial and demographic groups, regardless of medical or dental coverage and political party affiliation, agreed. It is clear that expanding Medicare to include a dental benefit has strong public support and presents a rare opportunity for legislating a policy that transcends political affiliation and demographic characteristics.

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CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

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