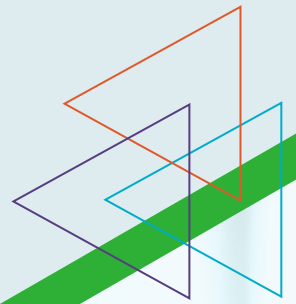




# The 2023 State of America's Oral Health and Wellness Report

Commissioned by Delta Dental Plans Association



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# Foreword from James W. Hutchison

## President & CEO, Delta Dental Plans Association

There is an awakening underway about oral health's critical connection to overall health and wellness. It is encouraging to see an elevated consciousness about holistic wellness, which is manifesting in a dedication to at-home preventive care and routine visits to health practitioners, along with the breakdown of previously perceived health care silos.

To further advance holistic health and wellness, Delta Dental is establishing new rules of engagement around whole person health, supporting research into new methods of care delivery, and identifying innovative pathways toward equitable access to care. A central part of this work is the continued measurement, assessment, and analysis of consumers' oral health behaviors – and we are proud to present the third “State of America's Oral Health and Wellness Report,” which provides unique insight into oral and overall health behaviors across the country.

The findings show a continued understanding of the importance of preventive oral health care – for maintaining good oral health and avoiding urgent care – and underscores the value of dental benefits. The vast majority of adults (82%) believe dental coverage is an important part of overall

wellness, and the findings also demonstrate stronger knowledge of oral health's connection to well-being, which ultimately will help lead to better overall health outcomes. The report also reveals new perspectives on generational differences in understanding and habits.

The work here is just beginning. Delta Dental will continue driving and leading partnerships, collaborations, and engagements focused on innovation to help create better health outcomes for all.



**James W. Hutchison**  
President & CEO,  
Delta Dental Plans Association

# A message from Joseph Dill, DDS, MBA

## Chief Dental Officer, Delta Dental Plans Association

Good oral health is vitally important to everyone's health and well-being. As a dentist for more than 40 years, I'm encouraged to see that most people (92%) continue to understand the connection and its significance.

However, as this year's report concludes, more education is needed to close the knowledge gaps across generations. Gen Z trails Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers in understanding oral health's inseparable connection to overall health - while Boomers are less knowledgeable about the link between poor oral health and specific chronic diseases.

I also welcome the news that in a time of change, peoples' focus on oral health is one of few constants. In fact, nearly 6 in 10 adults plan on maintaining the better dental hygiene habits that they cultivated during the pandemic. It is also evident prevention works - approximately 4 in 5 adults who maintained regular dental visits stated they did not require future unexpected care. This is encouraging news.

Interestingly, when it comes to oral care products, the research indicates a notable portion of adults reach for more than just the medicine cabinet staples such as regular toothbrushes and fluoride toothpaste. One in 10 adults turn to eco-friendly options like bamboo or plant-based toothbrushes. Gen Z is a driving force behind these eco-friendly and non-traditional choices.

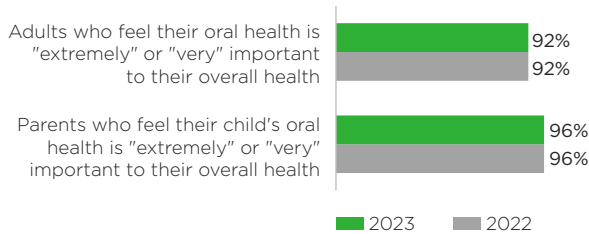
The research also conveys the benefits of having dental insurance in supporting optimal oral health. An overwhelming majority of people with dental insurance say it gives peace of mind, helps save money in the long run, and allows for a healthy life. Dental coverage is critical to reducing barriers to care so everyone can enjoy a better quality of life.



**Joseph Dill, DDS, MBA**  
**Chief Dental Officer,**  
Delta Dental Plans Association

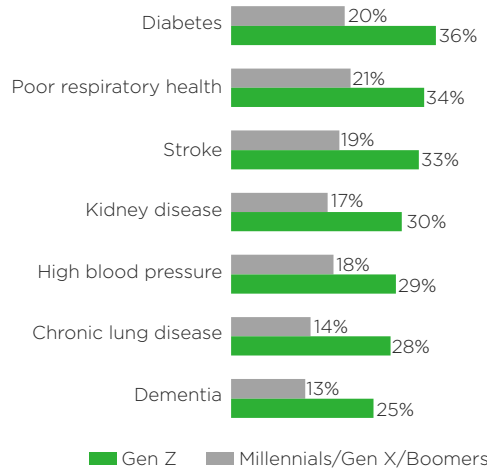
# Oral health remains a critical component of holistic health and wellness, but key knowledge gaps exist across generations

**Adults' understanding of the critical connection between oral health and overall health remains strong and constant year over year.** Most (92% in 2023 and 2022) believe their oral health is very, if not extremely, important to their overall health.



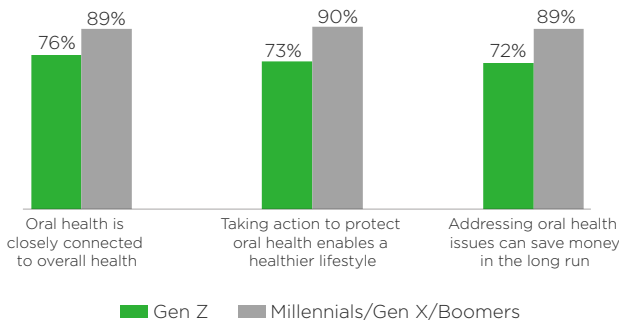
**While Boomers understand there is a strong overall connection between their oral health and overall health, they are less knowledgeable than other generations (Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X) on the link between poor oral health and specific chronic conditions and diseases.** Increasing education among all adults, but especially among Boomers, is key as these factors can be amplified with age.

### The percentage of adults who understand the connection between oral health and specific health conditions:



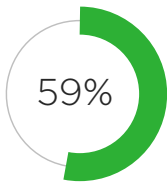
**However, there are varying levels of understanding based on generation.** Gen Z draws a slightly weaker connection to oral health than Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers combined who have a similar strong understanding. This could be due to a lack of experience with many dental issues at this stage of their lives.

### The percentage of adults who agreed with each statement:

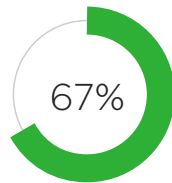


The pandemic fundamentally changed the way people think and act in a variety of ways and contributed to a renewed focus on holistic wellness. Since oral health and overall health are closely connected, many cultivated better oral hygiene habits during this time.

As a result, adults plan to maintain improved oral care habits they developed since 2020



Adults who agree they developed better oral care habits because of the pandemic, and they plan on maintaining the habits



Parents who agree their child developed better oral care habits because of the pandemic, and they plan on maintaining the habits

Good oral health is an essential part of maintaining overall health. Diseases in the mouth, such as periodontal disease, have been associated with a growing number of serious chronic physical conditions, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and Alzheimer's disease. Mental health can also be impacted, as the social stigma associated with dental disease can negatively affect well-being and self-esteem.



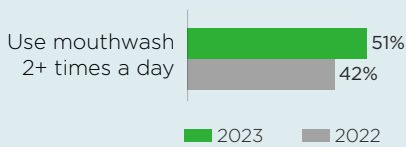
Teri Barichello, DMD  
Vice President and Chief Dental Officer,  
Delta Dental of Oregon



# Adults practice proper oral health care habits to avoid serious dental issues and major expenses

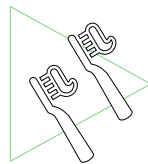
## Gen Z mouthwash usage is up.

They are more likely to use it multiple times per day than compared to 2022.



During the last year, adults practiced good oral health habits at home, but there is room for improvement when it comes to flossing and using mouthwash.

### The percentage of adults who keep up with recommended brushing, mouthwash, and flossing usage standards



**79%**  
brushed their teeth twice a day



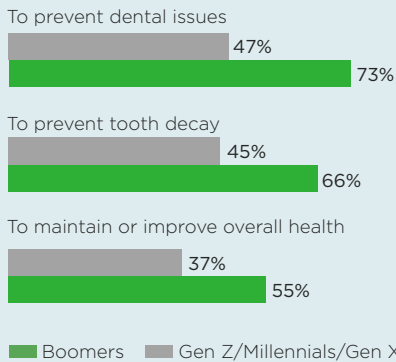
**36%**  
used mouthwash once a day



**31%**  
flossed once a day

When it comes to reasons for flossing, however, Gen Z/Millennials/Gen X lack the same sense of urgency claimed by Boomers.

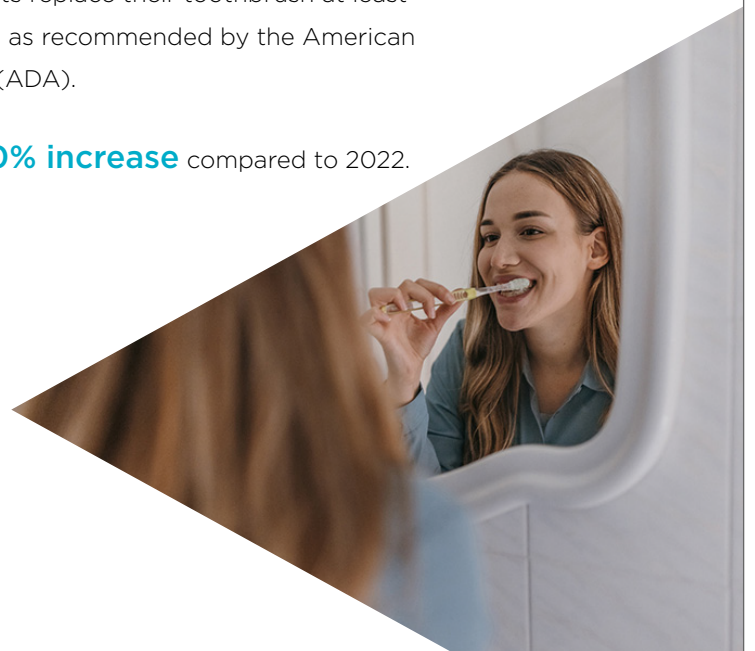
### Reasons for flossing



They're also making sure the products they use are in good condition by **keeping their toothbrushes fresh**, potentially another positive learned pandemic behavior.

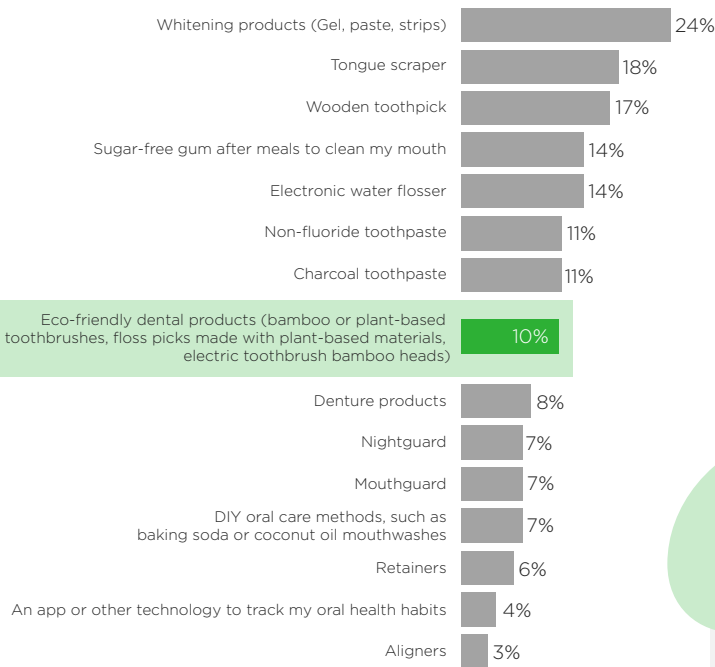
**64%** of adults replace their toothbrush at least every three months, as recommended by the American Dental Association (ADA).

This represents a **10% increase** compared to 2022.



**A notable portion of adults use eco-friendly and non-traditional oral care products every day.** When it comes to specific oral care products, most reach for more than just the medicine cabinet staples like regular toothbrushes and fluoride toothpaste, floss, and mouthwash. Today, 1 in 10 adults already turn to eco-friendly options like bamboo or plant-based toothbrushes or floss picks made with plant-based materials.

**Percentage of adults who use each product in their oral care routine**



**Gen Z is a driving force behind eco-friendly and non-traditional oral care product choices.**

While their usage of eco-friendly products is higher than Boomers (13% vs. 9%), they are almost twice as likely as Boomers (66% vs. 36%) to use eco-friendly or non-traditional products including whitening strips, electronic water flossers, and charcoal toothpaste.



**Ultimately, adults keep up with their oral hygiene for two reasons – to avoid serious dental issues in the future and to save money in the long run.**

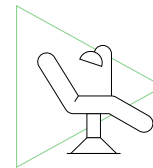
Preventing tooth decay, cavities, and gum disease are the top brushing motivators, and almost all people agree that properly maintaining their oral health can save them money over time.

**Top motivators of proper oral care**



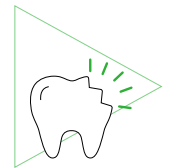
**87%**

To save money/avoid unexpected costs



**66%**

To prevent tooth decay



**66%**

To prevent issues like cavities and gum disease

**Although charcoal toothpastes are trendy, there is no evidence to support the notion that they whiten teeth. In fact, charcoal toothpastes can harm teeth due to the abrasive effects on the teeth and gums leading to enamel loss and sensitivity. Don't believe the hype, for best results, use a fluoridated toothpaste.**

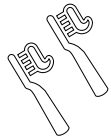
**Jeffery W. Johnston, DDS, MS**  
 Senior Vice President, Professional Services and Chief Science Officer,  
 Delta Dental of Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana



Parents are also making sure their children adhere to recommended oral care guidelines and switch out their toothbrushes frequently. The majority of children brush at least twice a day, floss at least once a day, and use mouthwash once a day. Almost 2 in 5 parents replace their child's toothbrush at least once a month, going above and beyond ADA recommendations.



The percentage of children who keep up with recommended brushing, mouthwash, and flossing usage standards



73%  
Brush twice a day



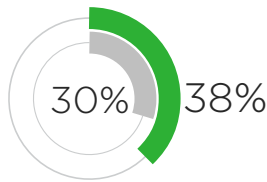
57%  
Use mouthwash once a day



55%  
Floss once a day

While parents are committed to instilling good oral hygiene habits with their children, there's still room for improvement. They claim the most common pitfalls are their child:

Percentage of parents replacing their children's toothbrush at least once every month



2023 2022



Eats too many sweets (44%)

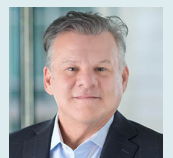


Does not floss enough (44%)

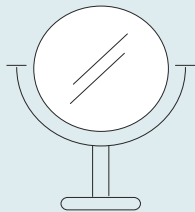


Does not brush their teeth enough (40%)

It is important to teach children about the many benefits of preventive oral care – brushing, flossing, twice yearly visits to the dentist – early in their lives, not just for the health of their teeth but to prevent tooth problems from impacting their physical and mental development. Overall health starts in the mouth. By starting dental visits at age one, and modeling good brushing and flossing routines at home, parents play an important role in promoting their kids' long-term health and wellness. When children learn to take care of their teeth at an early age, they develop habits that will give them a healthy smile to last a lifetime. ”



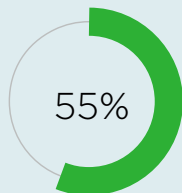
Daniel Croley, DMD  
Chief Dental Officer,  
Delta Dental of California



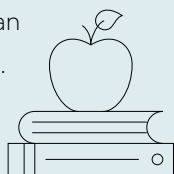
While prevention is the main reason for dental visits among adults (78%), personal appearance (16%) has become a rising factor. Adults are also citing more personal appearance reasons for flossing than in 2022, like **keeping teeth as white as possible** (20% in 2023 vs. 16% in 2022) and **freshening their breath** (26% in 2023 vs. 20% in 2022).

**More than 1 in 4 (26%) parents of children ages 3-12 report their child experienced an oral health issue in the past 12 months.**

Of those children...



missed school, with those affected missing an average of 4 days.



# Prevention remains the leading driver of dental visits, though personal appearance is a rising factor

## Regular preventive dental visits are crucial for maintaining good oral health.

The results are clear, as approximately 4 in 5 adults (81%) who maintained regular dental office visits said they did not require unexpected care in the future.



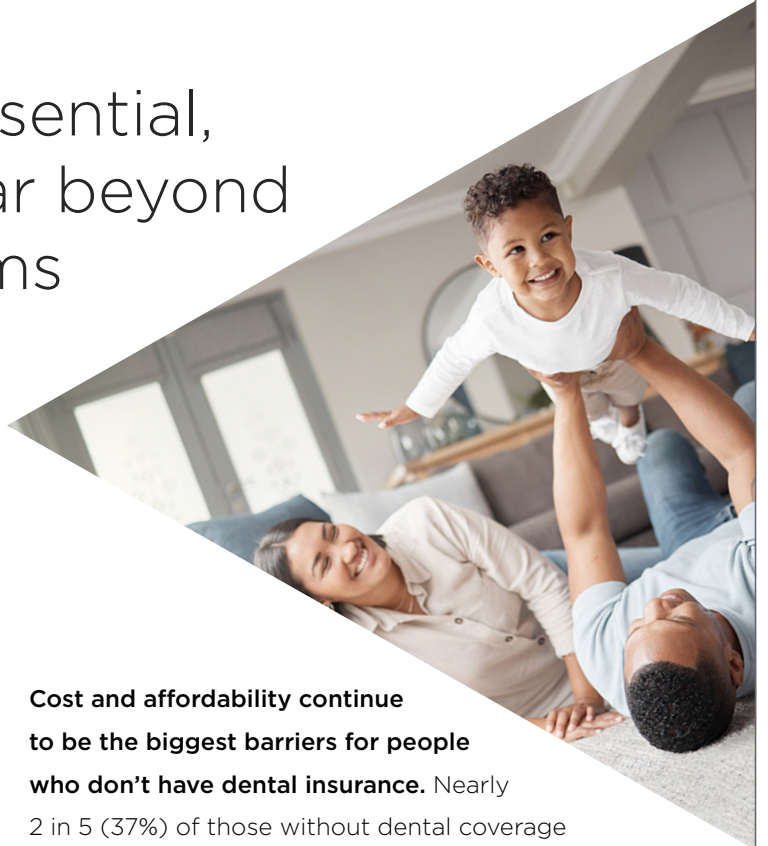
**Prevention also motivates parents to take their children to the dentist.** Among those who took their child to a dentist in 2022, more than 5 in 6 parents (85%) report that most of the dental visits in 2022 were preventive, whereas fewer than 1 in 6 (15%) say they took their child for an unexpected visit.

**When unexpected care is necessary, there are clear consequences for parents and children alike.** In fact, 1 in 3 (34%) parents with children experiencing dental issues have been forced to deal with at least one inconvenience. The most prominent consequence is that children miss days of school.

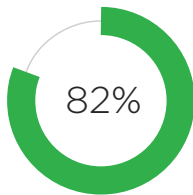
### Other consequences experienced by parents whose children had dental issues



# Dental insurance is essential, and the benefits go far beyond healthy teeth and gums



**Dental insurance is as important as ever**, with the vast majority of adults considering it an important part of overall wellness.



of adults agree that having dental insurance is essential to protecting oral and overall health

**The benefits of dental insurance are extremely clear, including health, financial, and emotional well-being.**

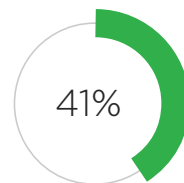
Currently, about 6 in 10 (59%) adults across the country have dental insurance, while 89% of parents report their child is covered. And while most (87%) believe that having coverage affords them good oral health, many cite a variety of additional benefits ranging from peace of mind, to helping keep up with consistent dentist visits, to being happy with the way they look.

### Top dental insurance benefits

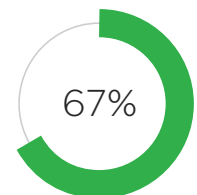


**Cost and affordability continue to be the biggest barriers for people who don't have dental insurance.** Nearly 2 in 5 (37%) of those without dental coverage claim it is because they cannot afford the monthly payment, while a third (34%) cite inability to afford additional out-of-pocket costs. The next largest barrier (25%) is that plans do not cover specific procedures that they need.

In the end, the pros of better overall health, peace of mind, and avoiding unexpected costs outweigh the cons for a sizable portion of those currently without benefits who expect to enroll in 2023.



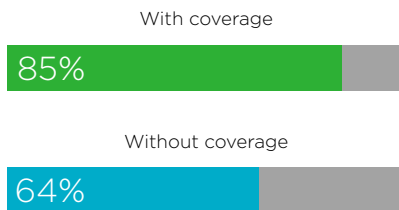
Adults currently without dental benefits who are likely to enroll within the next 12 months



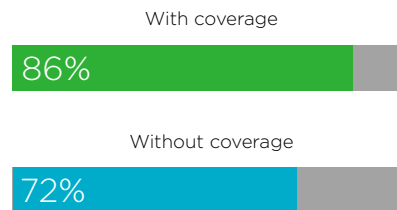
Parents who don't have dental benefits for their child hope to enroll in the next 12 months

**The results are evident – dental insurance is critical in helping people seek oral care from their dentist.** Adults and children with dental benefits were more likely to have visited the dentist in 2022 to seek preventive care than those without coverage.

Percentage of **adults**  
who visited the dentist in 2022

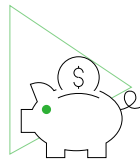


Percentage of **children**  
who visited the dentist in 2022



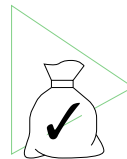
**Further, most people make a clear connection to tangible cost benefits to their dental insurance plans.** Adults say dental insurance helps save money in the long run, is well worth the cost, and provides pre-negotiated discounts with dentists.

Top cost benefits of dental insurance



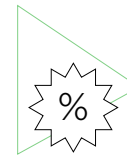
**85%**

helps save money in the long run



**84%**

is worth the cost



**79%**

provides discounts with dentists

The oral health outlook for 2023 is poised for continued improvement as U.S. adults and children intend to maintain the good oral hygiene habits they adopted during the pandemic and continue with regular preventive dental visits. Dental coverage is critical to supporting good oral health and well-being, which will help lead to greater overall health outcomes for all.

This report reinforces how access to dental insurance is critical to achieving optimal oral health and overall well-being. Reducing barriers to dental care is imperative to fostering greater oral health equity and improving health outcomes for all. Delta Dental is committed to helping address these barriers so everyone can enjoy healthier and happier lives. ”



**Joseph Dill, DDS, MBA**  
Chief Dental Officer,  
Delta Dental Plans Association

## About the research

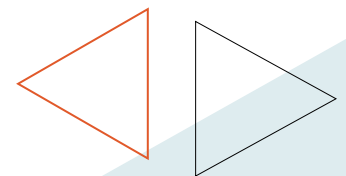
Delta Dental Plans Association commissioned a third-party market research firm, Material Holdings, LLC, to undertake research that formed the basis for this report. Material conducted its research between January 6 and January 23, 2023, using an email invitation and online surveys of two audiences recruited through an opt-in panel:

- 1,000 nationally representative Americans ages 18+
- 1,253 parents of children 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 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 2005
- 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 Oak Brook, 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, covering more than 89 million Americans and offering the country's largest dental network with approximately 152,000 participating dentists. Over the last decade, Delta Dental companies provided over \$1.88 billion in direct and in-kind support to improve the oral health of our communities.

# The nation's leading dental benefits provider

We make it easy to protect your smile and keep it healthy, with the largest network of dentists nationwide, quick answers, and personalized service.

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