In today's health-conscious era, advancements in medical care mean people are healthier than ever. Dentistry has achieved great success, helping more people keep their teeth longer and maintain better oral health.

Though dentistry has current knowledge and technology on its side, health disparities or uneven access to health care continue to prevent these advancements from helping everyone.

A powerful example of health disparities is the lack of equal and uniform dental care. Though some people see their dentist regularly, not everyone realizes the importance of dental visits or has the ability to see a dentist. What some see as an afterthought may cause danger if ignored and unknowingly develop into a life-threatening condition. The good news is that dentist visits and routine mouth care can make many mouth diseases 100 percent preventable.

**How your mouth can make you sick**

When teeth aren't regularly brushed and flossed at home, infection or inflammation can
develop in teeth and gums producing larger oral infections that can travel throughout the body. Poor mouth care of a mother can even cause illness in her son or daughter. Mothers are often unaware that contact with their child spreads her mouth bacteria and can make her children sick.

It's more important than ever to take care of your teeth with new research that shows a link between gum disease and other conditions in the body including:

- Stroke
- Heart disease
- Premature baby deliveries
- Rheumatoid arthritis

**Oral Cancer**

It is well known that tobacco and alcohol use can lead to oral cancer. What isn't well known is that the only thing that has positively influenced the outcome of oral cancers is early diagnosis and treatment. Most precancerous lesions in the mouth are not obvious to the average person, so seeing a trained dentist is critical to preventing the spread of these cancers.

**Who is at risk?**

Many people lack the information or resources to get good dental care, and often those are the very people who simply do not realize they are part of this disparity. People who are at risk for receiving less effective dental care include:

- Anyone who does not have transportation to go to the doctor.
- Those with low-paying jobs who can't take time off.
- Someone who eats carbs and sugars with frequency over time.
- Someone who doesn't brush or floss their teeth regularly.
- Any person who thinks it's common or even expected for adults to lose their teeth.
- Anyone who just doesn't have enough money to see the dentist.

**What you can do to help yourself and others.**

Even if money's tight, you and your family need to see the dentist twice a year for cleaning and X-rays. There are ways to get good dental care, even if you have limited resources. A few options include:

- Investigate the programs of the local university dental school -- they often offer discounted dental treatments and cleanings.
- Search locally for nonprofit organizations specializing in dental care.
- If you're worried about the dental health of your child, talk to their school- in some areas
nonprofits visit preschools and elementary schools to screen and treat children.

- Take initiative -- do your best to supply you and your family with toothbrushes and toothpaste. Check with local charities for free toothbrushes. You can brush with only water if nothing else is available, but this is not a permanent solution for healthy teeth.

Check with your local municipal public health department, state and local dental societies and associations, and free clinics for further resources and information.

Physicians and dentists can receive government reimbursement for applying protective fluoride varnish on teeth for children up to 3 years old. Also, Medicaid offers dental coverage for the handicapped and, in some states, will allow dental care to be paid in full for qualifying members under the age of 21. Many dentists offer discounts to people without dental insurance coverage.

**Help your doctor help you**

To fill in the gaps in dental care, new ideas are emerging. Even if you haven't seen the dentist for a long time, your physician can help you and your children have healthier mouths, teeth and gums. Make sure that your physician checks you and your children for common mouth problems. If they're not sure what to do, the Ohio Department of Public Health is giving primary care physicians a DVD that teaches them how to look for mouth infections/inflammations. This can get your physician started helping you and your family have a healthier mouth and a healthier body.

**Someone's watching over you**

At Case Western Reserve University and other schools around the country, dentists give talks to medical students; medical and dental students work side by side in the same clinical setting; medical residents train in dentistry rotations. Though dentists have historically "owned the mouth," by helping physicians learn about oral issues, the chances of discovering mouth problems early is improving. Working on the same team, they are reaching towards the mutual goal of optimal health.

**Related topics:** dental care, dentists

**Some websites to find low-cost dental care:**

- National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research
- American Dental Association
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Medicare or Medicaid
- Children’s Health Insurance Program