

## Tips for Effectively Addressing Oral Health in Integrated Primary Care Settings

Oral health impacts overall health, yet more than a third of people and nearly two-thirds of children under 4 years old seen by physicians each year have not seen a dentist that same year.<sup>1</sup> Individuals living with a chronic physical or behavioral health condition are at increased risk for oral disease.<sup>2</sup>

What can integrated behavioral health and primary care providers do to close this gap? Here are some tips for addressing oral health.

1. **Know the signs.** A patient may have an oral health need when they present with:

- Dry Mouth
- Bad breath that won't go away
- Red or swollen gums
- Tender or bleeding gums
- Painful chewing
- Loose teeth
- Sensitive teeth
- Receding gums or longer appearing teeth
- Mouth sore or irritation that doesn't heal
- Teeth that have changed color
- Holes or dark areas on teeth

2. **Train staff to recognize and talk about these signs.** You may want to talk about potential responses in team huddles or case reviews.
3. **Encourage providers to ask patients** about these symptoms and other risk factors for oral disease during appointments. Questions can include if they experience any dental or mouth pain, if they have bleeding gums, or when they last visited a dentist.
4. **Provide educational materials** on the importance of regular oral care in your center's common areas and exam rooms. The [National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research](#) and HRSA's [Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center](#) have brochures and fact sheets.
5. **Invite dental professionals to your center** on a regular basis to encourage coordination and to build a shared understanding of each other's contribution to maintaining oral health ("Grand Rounds"). Visit [Donated Dental Services](#) to find programs in your state.
6. **Track oral health.** Document interactions about oral health in your EHR to monitor how frequently providers ask about oral health, when concerns were identified, the number of referrals and follow up appointments made and to ensure the entire team is informed about patients' oral health.

<sup>1</sup> Medical Expenditure Panel Survey. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. 2011.

[https://meps.ahrq.gov/data\\_stats/MEPS\\_topics.jsp?topicid=47Z-1](https://meps.ahrq.gov/data_stats/MEPS_topics.jsp?topicid=47Z-1)

<sup>2</sup> Gum Disease Risk Factors. American Academy of Periodontology. <https://www.perio.org/consumer/risk-factors>

7. **Learn what services are covered and by whom.** Get to know your state insurance coverage laws, including whether Medicaid offers any dental benefits and to whom.
8. **Make it easier for your patients to access oral health services.** Consider ways your organization can integrate dental care, such as setting up a mobile van or contracting with a dentist to provide services onsite a few days a month.
9. **Stay educated about oral health.** Consider taking CMEs on oral health during the next year.

Want to learn more? Visit our [Oral Care web page](#) for more resources.

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