

GERIATRIC DENTISTRY *The delivery of dental care to older adults involving diagnosis, prevention, management and treatment of problems associated with age related diseases.*

Overview

The mouth is referred to as a mirror of overall health, reinforcing that oral health is an integral part of general health.

An aging population involving an increased retention of teeth, often with complex restorations, is expected to increase the demand for dental care in older people.

In the elderly population poor oral health has been considered a risk factor for general health problems. Older adults are more susceptible to oral conditions or diseases due to an increase in chronic conditions and physical/mental disabilities. Thus, the elderly form a distinct group in terms of provision of care.

Classifying Patients

The elderly can be classified into many criteria. Classifying them allows for a more detailed and accurate analysis of the diversity within this age group and makes diagnosis and treatment planning more personalized. The following is a common classification of the elderly according to age group.

- **Young-old** → 65-74 years
- **Middle-old** → 75-84 years
- **Oldest-old** → ≥ 85 years



The dental classification of aging however is more useful if it is based on the patient's ability to seek dental care independently.

- **Frail elderly** have chronic, debilitating, physical, medical, and emotional problems who are unable to maintain independence without continued assistance from others. As a result, most of the frail elderly live in the community with support services.
- **Functionally dependent** elderly have chronic, debilitating, physical and medical or emotional problems or any combination that compromises their capacity to the extent where they are unable to maintain independence and as a result are homebound or institutionalized

Key Points on Aging and Dental Health

- The demographic of older adults (i.e., 65 years of age and older) is growing and likely will be an increasingly large part of dental practice in the coming years.
- Although better than in years past, the typical aging patient's baseline health state can be complicated by comorbid conditions (e.g., hypertension, diabetes mellitus) and physiologic changes associated with aging.
- Older adults may regularly use several prescriptions and/or over-the-counter medications, making them more vulnerable to medication errors, drug interactions or adverse drug reactions.
- Potential physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments associated with aging may make home oral health care and patient education/communications challenging.
- Dental conditions associated with aging include dry mouth (xerostomia), root and coronal caries, and periodontitis; patients may show increased sensitivity to drugs used in dentistry, including local anesthetics and analgesics

Barriers to Effective Dental Care

As people age, they attend dental services less frequently, and face several barriers to accessing dental care. This involves clinics not being easily accessible for frail, disabled or functionally dependent elderly who have limited mobility, and are wheelchair dependent and/or cognitively impaired. Access is often even more difficult for elderly residing in residential aged care facilities.

As people age and become frail, disabled or functionally dependent, their oral health is put at great risk, due to issues associated with:

- **Cognitive impairment** – such as Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease which results in uncooperative behavior due to confessional states
- **Functional limitations** – such as poor dexterity, strength or pain resulting from hand and upper limb dysfunction, and diminished eyesight
- **Functional problems** - such as swallowing difficulties or tongue and mouth movements

Management of Geriatric Patients

- Developing a routine with oral hygiene care at the same time every day with the patients' input as to when is most convenient
- Undertaking oral care in a quiet distraction-free environment
- Use of short, simple sentences and directions
- Use of task-breakdown and one-step instructions placement of a step by step poster illustrating each step
- Use of non-verbal cues e.g. facial expressions, hand gestures, body language (reassuring patient)
- Gentle touch to promote trust
- Using reminders and prompts for oral hygiene care