

Community Statement on the Integral Role of Oral and Dental Health Care in Protecting Americans from Viral Pandemics

The undersigned organizations recognize that extraordinary efforts are essential to help our nation combat COVID-19. As a vital element of America's healthcare delivery system, oral and dental care providers see firsthand the damage caused by this outbreak and the strain it is placing on our nation. It is for that reason we write to urge you to expand access to oral and dental care to mitigate the burdens imposed by viral infection now and help protect Americans from risk when pandemics arise in the future.

It is well established that chronic diseases disproportionately impact older adults and impose a substantial cost on the federal government. It is also well established that these diseases – which have been linked to susceptibility to COVID-19 – are also closely linked to untreated oral microbial infection. COVID-19's tragic toll has therefore provided strong indication that chronically ill individuals of all ages with oral disease face a substantially greater risk of serious Coronavirus-related illness and death.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), chronic conditions put nearly half (45.4%) of U.S. adults at increased risk for coronavirus-related complications¹, and an estimated 9-in-10 of all patients hospitalized due to COVID-19 were concurrently suffering a chronic condition.² *The Washington Post* recently reported a similar finding: “Although the disease is typically more severe among older people, people of any age *with underlying medical conditions* are at increased risk if they contract the virus.”³ (emphasis added)

Due to the critical need to improve America's preparedness for pandemics, safeguarded and expanded access to oral and dental care must be an essential part of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic and our post-COVID national health strategy. However, most Medicare beneficiaries do not receive oral or dental care, even when their physician has deemed it to be medically necessary for the treatment of Medicare-covered diseases, and Medicaid coverage for dental care is at risk as states grapple with the pandemic's severe economic and social consequences.

Given all we now know, the close nexus between chronic conditions and vulnerability to viral infections is more evident than ever. Further, a strong multinational and inter-professional clinical consensus exists that oral and dental care is integral to preventive and proactive treatment of numerous diseases and medical conditions as well as to diverting chronically ill patients from overburdened emergency departments and inpatient hospital settings.

As a result, the undersigned organizations urge you to give urgent consideration to the following priorities:

- Ensure oral and dental care providers, particularly those treating underserved populations, have access to financial and other types of relief as well as personal protective equipment to aid them during this crisis.
- Support financial relief for states and territories for the duration of the pandemic and for the recovery period thereafter to enable critical services, including Medicaid oral and dental care, to be maintained.
- Combat chronic disease by expanding Medicare beneficiaries' access to evidence-based coverage for preventive and proactive medically necessary oral and dental health therapies.
- Document the presence of oral disease and bacteria in patients suffering severe COVID-19 infection as well as the comorbidities associated with it, including diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.
- Integrate oral and dental care with medical care in the strategic planning our nation has already embarked upon in order to be less vulnerable to and more prepared for future viral pandemics.

¹ *Population-Based Estimates of Chronic Conditions Affecting Risk for Complications from Coronavirus Disease, United States*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Emerging Infectious Diseases, Volume 26, Number 8—August 2020. [[link](#)]

² *Hospitalization Rates and Characteristics of Patients Hospitalized with Laboratory-Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019 – COVID-NET, 14 States, March 1–30, 2020*, CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, April 17, 2020 / 69(15);458–464. [[link](#)]

³ “New CDC Data Shows Danger of Coronavirus for Those with Diabetes, Heart or Lung Disease, Other Chronic Conditions,” *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2020. [[link](#)]