

## Oral Health for Older Adults

### Principles of Oral Health Care for Older Adults

ADA NSW recognises the core principles of oral care for older adults as set out by both NSW Health<sup>1</sup> and the WHO<sup>2</sup>.

These core principles include:

- Improving the oral health of older adults is a high priority and must be the responsibility of the whole health care sector – including government, non-government and private providers<sup>1</sup>
- Recognising the range of complex economic, social and behavioural factors that determine oral health for older adults<sup>1</sup>
- Integrating oral health with general health care using a holistic approach that addresses common risk factors and leads to improvements in overall health<sup>1</sup>
- Identifying major barriers as well as key facilitating factors to oral health services for older people<sup>2</sup>
- Pursuing opportunities for the establishment, continuation or improvement of oral health services and health promotion programmes.<sup>2</sup>

### ADA NSW Position

ADA NSW recognises that older adults are a priority population who require special attention. As the overall health of adults varies widely at any given age, oral health care and services need to be patient-centred, timely and provided as part of an overall integrated healthcare plan. Independent adults living within the community must have access to appropriate oral health care that meets their economic, geographic and cultural requirements. It is recognised that many older adults have increased vulnerability to oral disease due to polypharmacy, significant limitations in mobility, and marked changes in diet and possible reduction in capacity to undertake personal oral care measures.

Older adults seeking and requiring community based support services or entering residential care should undergo an oral health assessment by a qualified dental practitioner that informs their ongoing oral health needs. Those living in residential aged care facilities require oral health care to be provided as part of their overall health care plan. Within community- or residential- based care regular oral health screenings at appropriate intervals by a dental practitioner will support access to appropriate preventative and restorative dental treatment.

Furthermore, those with significant chronic illnesses and/or dementia require specialised dental services, which should be available on site within all residential aged care facilities, to ensure that their oral health needs are met. Indigenous older adults require access to oral health care services that are culturally appropriate and organised, funded and delivered in such a way that the significant disparities existing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are addressed. All health care providers, including dental practitioners, must be educated, trained and competent in providing comprehensive oral health

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care for older adults. Carers of older adults living both in the community and in aged care facilities should be educated and enabled to provide daily oral hygiene measures for those in their care.

## Facts

- The Australian population is ageing – the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that in 2015 there were 3.5 million Australians aged 65 years and over.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2026, 20% of the NSW population will be 65 years and older, compared with 13.1% in 2001.<sup>1</sup>
- More than 1 in 3 older adults need assistance with daily activities such as self-care, communication or mobility and 1 in 20 live in residential aged care.<sup>3</sup>
- Whilst approximately 26% of Australians over 65 years and 44% over 75 years have complete tooth loss, those retaining their natural teeth frequently suffer from complications including higher prevalence of dental caries and periodontal diseases.<sup>5</sup>
- Both private and public oral health services will require increased resources, education and training to meet the oral health needs of the ageing population.
- The overall health - including oral health - of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is poorer than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Oral health services for Indigenous older adults must be culturally appropriate with appropriate access and pathways for integrated care.<sup>7</sup>
- With increasing retention of natural teeth, more complex medical histories and more difficult oral health prevention and maintenance requirements for older adults, new skills, programmes and services will be required to effectively manage their oral health care needs.<sup>1, 8</sup>
- Recognition that poor oral health can influence poor general health and that existing acute and chronic medical conditions can be exacerbated by poor oral health resulting in hospitalisation or death.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

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