



# Oral Health in Native American Elderly

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## Importance of Oral Health

Oral health is an important characteristic of aging. Like other body systems, the mouth, or oral cavity, undergoes natural changes due to aging. The importance of good oral hygiene is significant to successful aging, retaining natural teeth, and general health. It enhances our ability to speak, smile, taste, chew, swallow, and convey feelings and emotions through facial expression (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

Without proper oral hygiene and dental care, elders are at risk for developing periodontal (gum) disease, tooth decay, oral cancers, and other oral health diseases. As individuals age, they are more likely to have increased health concerns and suffer from multiple chronic diseases. Some risk factors for developing periodontal disease include lifetime loss of attachment, exposed interproximal concavities and root surfaces, poor oral hygiene, limited oral services, obesity (bidirectional), and osteoporosis (Yellowitz & Schneiderman, 2014).

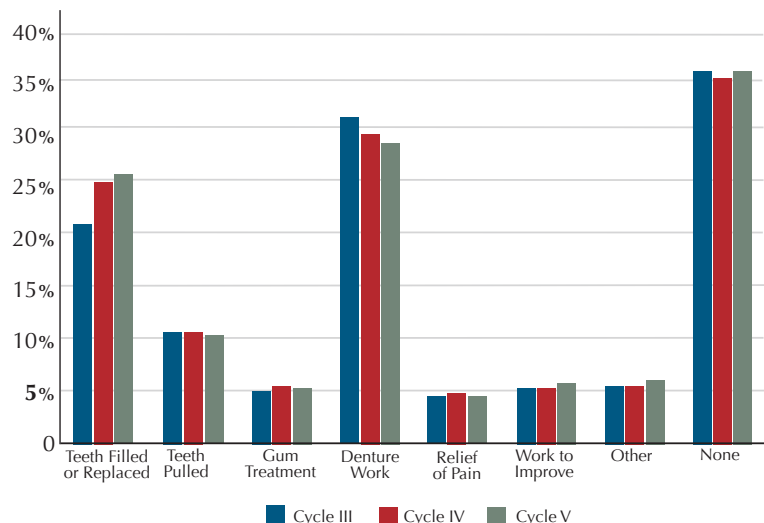
Clinical data from the Indian Health Service (IHS) shows that Native American elders make up six percent of the United States population, but account for less than three percent of the Native American dental patients (Jones, Niendorff, & Broderick, 2000). The U.S. elderly cohort is a diverse population ranging from 55 and over. Many elders are not able or willing to receive routine preventive care due to other health conditions, disabilities, access issues, fewer financial resources, and/or a belief that they do not need the care or that the care has no value to them (Yellowitz & Schneiderman, 2014). The importance of oral health has been established by health care professionals; however, it has not been recognized by the elderly. Most elders that receive dental care do so for the relief of symptoms and less than 1/3 seek routine oral examinations (Jones, Niendorff, & Broderick, 2000). The 2000 Surgeon General’s Report on Oral Health in America stated that increased access to oral health care among the elderly could improve their general health, treatment outcomes, nutritional status, and quality of life (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

## Summary of Findings

The information about elder oral health care in Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian tribal members was collected from “Identifying our Needs: A Survey of Elders” conducted by the National Resource Center on Native American Aging Cycles III, IV, and V covering the years 2007-2014 (NRCNAA, 2007-2014). The “Identifying our Needs: A Survey of Elders” survey is done in three year cycles, Cycle III spans 2005-2008, Cycle IV spans 2008-2011, and Cycle V spans 2011-2014. The total number of participants by cycle are N=14,751, N=18,089, and N=17,049 for cycles III, IV, and V, respectively.

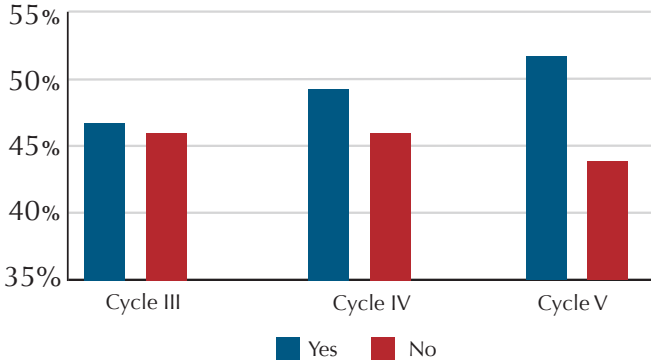
Figure 1 demonstrates the dental work needed over the past three survey cycles. The number of individuals needing denture work has decreased, demonstrating an improvement in denture work care. The categories of “teeth filled or replaced” and “other” have increased. The remaining areas of dental work needed have remained fairly constant. The two areas of dental care requiring the most work include: 1) teeth filled or replaced (ranges from 21%-26%), and 2) denture work ranges from 29% to 32%.

**Figure 1-Percentage of Dental Work Needed at Time of Survey by Native American Elders**



In Figure 2, a rise can be seen in the number of elders who have seen a dental provider (dentist or dental hygienist) in the past year from time of survey completion between the cycles III, IV and V.

**Figure 2-Percent of Native American Elders that have seen a Dental Provider in the Past Year at Time of the Survey**



## Discussion

Figure 2 showed an increase in the percent of elders that have seen a dental provider in the last year. Figure 1 only showed a decline in one of the seven categories of dental work, with most remaining constant throughout the cycles III, IV and V. Awareness of the importance of dental care during the aging process and its health benefits must be identified by the elders. Good oral health care can help improve general health and their quality of life. Ensuring elders have access to oral health care is critical to successful aging (Yellowitz & Schneiderman, 2014).

## Tips to Maintain Good Oral Health

*(American Dental Association (ADA) Division of Science, 2010; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011)*

- Brush teeth twice a day
- Clean between teeth with dental floss/interdental cleaner once a day
- Use products with American Dental Association (ADA) seal of acceptance, which indicates they are safe and effective products
- Drink fluoridated water
- Use fluoride toothpaste
- Regular visits to the dentist for checkups and professional cleanings
- Tell dentists your health conditions (e.g. diabetic)
- Discuss oral problems with dentist (e.g. dry mouth)

- Maintain good control of blood glucose levels (reduce risk of developing fungal infections)
- Do not smoke (reduce risk of developing periodontitis and fungal infections)
- Limit alcohol (risk factor for oral disease)
- Dentures should be removed and cleaned daily

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