

DELTA DENTAL®

The Overlooked Frontline: Caregiving, Cognitive Decline and Oral Health

New research reveals the oral health challenges caregivers manage at home, what dental providers see firsthand and a critical awareness gap among older adults.

Cognitive decline can make daily oral care harder to provide and prioritize. Caregivers are often on the frontline, taking on greater responsibility for the oral health of those in their care.

What existing research tells us



Adults with poor periodontal health, including gum disease and tooth loss, are **21% more likely to develop dementia.**

Source: Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, 2022

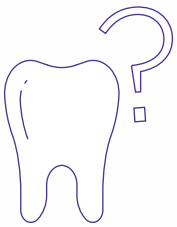


Adults **60 and older** with oral health problems were **more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's within five years.**

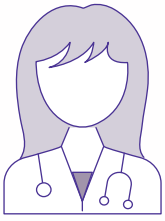
Source: Brain Sciences, 2023

What our survey revealed

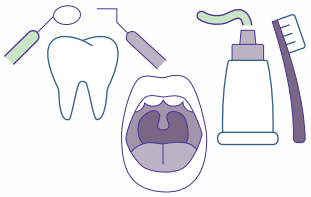
CAREGIVERS & ORAL CARE



More than 6 in 10
caregivers are **unsure they are providing oral care correctly.**



More than 7 in 10
want **clearer guidance.**



73% of caregivers say **oral care management adds to the emotional demands of caregiving, either moderately or a great deal.**

Could **oral health** be connected to **cognitive decline or brain health?**

61% Yes

27% Not Sure

12% No

As cognitive decline advances:

56% have noticed oral health changes in the person they care for.

53% say oral care has become more time-consuming as their loved one's cognitive decline advances.



A loved one's daily oral health may depend on a caregiver who is still looking for guidance and support.

As cognitive decline progresses, caregivers find themselves taking on more responsibility in daily oral care. But many aren't confident they have the resources to do it effectively.

76% **were already aware** that oral bacteria can travel to the brain and contribute to inflammation tied to cognitive decline, showing **caregivers are more primed for this message than the public.**

63% sometimes or often **skip or delay brushing,** flossing or other daily oral care for their loved one because of competing caregiving demands.

68% remind the older adult in their care to brush or floss **more often than they remind children** they care for.

79% **want advice or resources** from dental providers about caring for an older adult's oral health.

85% **say seeing their loved one smile** makes the effort feel worthwhile.

DENTAL PROVIDERS & COGNITIVE DECLINE

Dental providers frequently observe oral health changes in their patients experiencing cognitive decline.

Providers say cognitive impairment can make oral hygiene harder to maintain.

82% have treated a patient experiencing **cognitive decline** within the last month.

82% say patients with cognitive impairment are **more likely to show declines in oral hygiene over time** compared to patients without cognitive impairment.

86% say **oral health changes may serve as an early sign** of broader functional or cognitive decline.

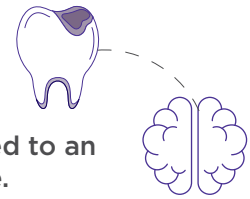
78% of providers feel more confident addressing physical-aging oral issues than cognitive-decline-related ones, **even though 72% already screen** for cognitive changes in health history intake.

OLDER ADULTS & DENTAL HEALTH

Older adults value oral health, but the possible connection to cognitive health remains a knowledge gap for many.



Only 30%



believe **poor oral health may be linked to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.**

Awareness can be a catalyst for action.



83% of older adults want **more research into the possible relationship** between oral bacteria and cognitive impairment, including Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.



81% say oral health **plays a meaningful role** in their quality of life.



82% say that after learning about the possible connection, **they would prioritize their oral health care.**

Caregivers are **asking for help,** dental providers **recognize the challenge** and older adults **deserve more information** to advocate for their own care. More education and support could make a difference **for all three.**

Delta Dental Insurance Company offers comprehensive, high-quality oral health care coverage to more than 27 million enrollees.

Learn more at deltadentalins.com

Methodology: Delta Dental commissioned Atomik Research to conduct three online surveys throughout the United States: 1,000 adults age 40 and over who care for an aging family member, 1,000 adults age 65 and over and 250 dental providers. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for each consumer survey and plus or minus 6 percentage points for the provider survey, each at a 95 percent confidence level.

Fieldwork was conducted between July 1 and July 7, 2026.

Atomik Research, part of 4media group, is a creative market research agency.

