

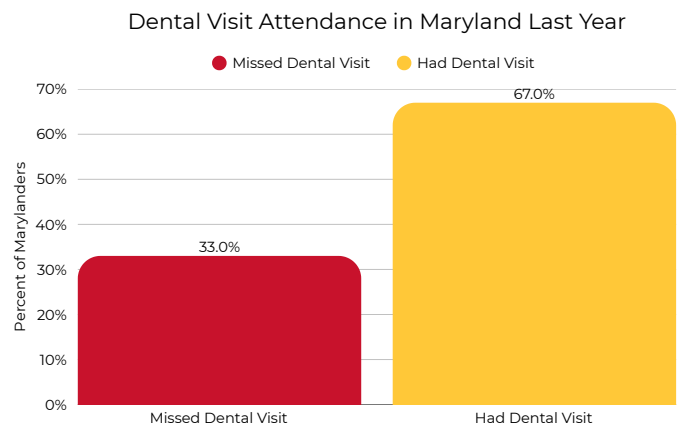
More Than 2 Million Marylanders Skip Dental Visits

Finding Signals Wake Up Call For More Than Just Dentists

Key Finding:

Over 2.2 million Marylanders — 33% of the state population — missed a dental visit in the past year.

This finding reveals that a significant portion of Maryland's population is not receiving comprehensive oral health services, which can put them at risk for more than just cavities.



Skipping a Dental Visit is Not Only an Oral Health Problem

Lack of access to dental care is a public health warning that affects more than oral health. It can affect chronic disease, mental health, child development, and even school performance.

What's at Stake When Dental Visits Are Missed

When a patient misses a dental visit, they not only miss an opportunity to prevent and treat oral disease, they also miss an important opportunity to learn about and identify serious health risks, prevent chronic disease, and address mental, emotional, and developmental well-being. It is well-documented that oral and overall health are linked. This connection is fundamental in assessing health risk and diagnosing and treating disease. Some examples are below.

- **Physical Health Risks**
 - **Diabetes:** Gum disease is both a warning sign and a complication of diabetes.
 - **Heart Disease and Stroke:** Chronic oral inflammation contributes to cardiovascular risk.
 - **Oral Cancer:** Regular dental visits allow dentists to detect early lesions that may be missed in other settings.
 - **Poor Nutrition:** Pain or missing teeth can lead to restricted diets and poor nutrition.
 - **Speech Challenges:** Pain or missing teeth can often create speech challenges, especially in children and older adults.
- **Mental and Emotional Wellbeing**
 - **Low Self-Esteem:** Poor dental health or missing teeth can affect appearance and can reduce confidence, job opportunities, and social engagement.
 - **Mental Health:** Oral disease and missing teeth are linked to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal.
- **Child Development and Education**
 - **School Attendance:** Oral pain is a top reason for missed school days among children.
 - **Academic Performance:** Dental problems and pain impair concentration, sleep, nutrition, and behavior.
 - **Long-term Effects:** Untreated issues can lead to chronic absences and developmental delays.

Call to Action

As a front-line health care provider, it is imperative to find time to coordinate care, share expertise, and work together with other front-line providers to ensure excellent outcomes and the best patient care possible.

What You Can Do

Primary Care Providers:

- **Ask About Oral Health.** Include a question or two about dental health in routine medical visits.
- **Refer Proactively.** Encourage patients to establish care with a dental provider — especially those with diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or pregnancy.
- **Use Your EMR.** Include prompts for overdue dental visits and oral health risk factors.
- **Collaborate Locally.** Partner with dental providers in your area for warm handoffs.
- **Support Care Navigation.** Help patients with Medicaid or limited care options find a dental provider.

Dentists:

- **Screen for Medial Risks.** Take blood pressure, ask about A1C history, and note signs of systemic disease.
- **Educate Patients.** Reinforce how oral health connects to overall health — especially for chronic disease management.
- **Refer Back.** Communicate concerns to PCPs when systemic issues are suspected.
- **Support Care Navigation.** Help patients with Medicaid or limited care options find a dental provider.

A Unified Message for Patients

Your mouth is a part of your body. Routine dental visits are not optional. Missing dentist visits not only puts you at risk for oral disease and tooth loss. It can lead to medical complications as well as emotional and developmental issues, especially in children.

Every patient deserves to understand the important relationship between the mouth and the body.

Next Steps for Providers

- ☒ Build referral relationships between medical and dental offices.
- ☒ Incorporate oral health into chronic disease protocols.
- ☒ Use care coordinators to bridge the gap for high-risk patients.

For more, visit health.maryland.gov/oral-health.

Citation: Maryland Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, BRFSS 2022.