

Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Dental Care

In this Issue Brief, you can learn about adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their dental care.

We reviewed research about adults with I/DD and dental care. We learned that:

- Adults with I/DD have a high need for oral health care.
- States have the option to cover oral health services for adults who are on Medicaid.
 - In some states, the Medicaid program uses a different name and does not include the word “Medicaid.”

We looked into access to dental care for this group in four states. We also looked into trends in dental issues faced by this group in the country as a whole.

Adults with I/DD and Dental Care

It’s not easy for adults with I/DD to get dental care

Researchers have looked at why it’s not easy for adults with I/DD to get dental care.

Some reasons are:

- There aren’t enough dentists and other oral health professionals.
- There aren’t enough oral health professionals with the training and education to treat adults with I/DD.
- It’s difficult to provide sedation or alternatives to sedation. Dentists and other health care providers may use sedation to care for adults with



I/DD. When an adult with I/DD has sensitivity, anxiety, or other issues, sedation can be helpful. But there are ways to avoid sedation. Desensitizing a person to the experience of receiving oral health care is one way.

Desensitization services are important. Yet in general, these services aren't covered by Medicaid or aren't available to adults with I/DD.

- Sometimes the dentist's office or hospital is far away. It can be hard to get there.
- For adults who live in a care home, it can sometimes be hard to get to the location where they'll get dental care.

Question: In the United States, which group has a greater need for oral health care, adults with I/DD or adults who don't have I/DD?

Answer: Adults with I/DD

Adults with I/DD have a high need for dental care

Adults with I/DD may have chronic conditions. Oral health issues can make chronic conditions worse in numerous ways:

- Oral health problems make heart disease worse.
- They can make mental health worse.
 - This includes thoughts and feelings.
- They can make it hard to eat.
- They can make it hard to go out or see friends.

Also, adults with I/DD have more oral health issues than other groups of adults.



Adults with I/DD have:

- More gum disease.
- More cavities that haven't been treated.

More adults with I/DD get teeth pulled too.

Adults with I/DD have particular reasons for needing dental care or extra dental care

Some adults with I/DD need dental care because of:

- problems with chewing, swallowing, and drooling.
- an open bite;
- variations in the size or number of teeth;
- teeth grinding or clenching;
- mouth breathing;
- side effects from certain prescriptions causing oral health problems; or
- difficulty with brushing.
 - Brushing inside and outside of teeth can be hard. Plaque then remains on the teeth.
 - Some caregivers help with brushing and flossing.

Some adults with I/DD have a compromised immune system.

- A compromised immune system can lead to more oral infections.

Some adults with I/DD have sensitivity.

- Some adults with sensitivity can't have someone touch their mouth. Sometimes



caregivers don't feel sure what to do to help with oral health. Helping can be hard for them.

- They need special treatment if brushing or flossing is difficult.

People with I/DD have particular needs while receiving their dental care

- Adults with I/DD often need a ride to get dental care.
- They often need more frequent cleanings than other adults.
- Adults with I/DD might need longer appointments than other dental patients.
 - Some people can't find a dental care provider who can spend enough time with them.
- Adults with I/DD might need specialized equipment for their dental care.
- Adults with I/DD might need a teledentistry appointment.
 - Teledentistry is online dental care. A teledentistry appointment can be an easy way to have a first appointment.
 - Some dentists prefer in-person visits or are not comfortable doing teledentistry.
- Some adults with I/DD may need to get dental care at a university dental school. But these universities aren't usually located in rural areas.



Researchers are looking into when sedation is necessary for dental care.

Select Services to Address the Oral Health Needs of Adults with I/DD

Clinics can be designed to serve adults with I/DD

Some adults with I/DD at a dental office or a clinic have needs that require special equipment or special help. For example, they may need to:

- use a wheelchair;
- use stabilization devices or transfer devices;
- use speech-generating devices or choice cards; or
- have extra help because of uncontrolled body movements.

Some states have implemented dental case management services and other solutions

Dental case management services benefit adults with I/DD

Four states cover dental case management services. There is a code for billing for providers to spend extra time coordinating care for patients with special needs.

In New Mexico, dentists are paid a fee for providing care for adults with I/DD when they use a specific procedure code. They can only use the code after completing a training and certification program.



Indiana's Medicaid agency works on:

- making sure dental appointments get scheduled;
- arranging transportation if needed; and
- providing support during appointments.

They do this work through contracted services.

Some states cover the extra time it takes to obtain medical histories from patients; to coordinate their transportation; or to assist when patients have needs related to behavioral health.

Sedation is often necessary and is covered by all states

Sedation is often necessary to provide necessary dental care for adults with I/DD. All states cover sedation.

Sedation can sometimes be avoided if wait time for this service is too long

One of several ways to avoid sedation is desensitization.

The District of Columbia covers desensitization services for people enrolled in a Medicaid program that enables them to get long-term care services and supports in their home or community.

Not all states cover desensitization services. More work can be done so that dentists and others can work to avoid sedation.

Minimally invasive dentistry benefits adults with I/DD

Minimally invasive dentistry includes:

- silver diamine fluoride (SDF) treatments;
- fluoride varnishes; and
- resin sealants.



Minimally invasive dentistry helps prevent the need for procedures that could require sedation.

Several states cover minimally invasive dentistry.

In California, SDF treatment isn't covered under the California Medicaid plan to all individuals with I/DD. California covers the treatment using funds that are part of a program called Medicaid Section 1115 Demonstrations.

Preventive care can prevent emergency dental care in adults with I/DD

Emergency dental care may be necessary when an individual doesn't receive preventive dental care. In states with no dental coverage, adults with I/DD who have Medicaid coverage may seek emergency dental care after not receiving preventive dental care.

More frequent dental visits can be necessary for adults with I/DD

Some states, such as New Jersey and the District of Columbia, cover more than two routine dental visits per year when a provider can show that the patient needs it.

Some states provide full coverage for dental services for adults with I/DD

Louisiana covers adults with I/DD who are enrolled in a program called 1915(c) waivers.

Adults with I/DD in Louisiana are covered for:

- diagnostic and preventive services;
- restorative services;
- endodontics, periodontics, and prosthodontics;
- oral and maxillofacial surgery;
- orthodontics; and
- emergency care.



Louisiana has stated that investing in preventive dental care for this population is cost effective. They found that it will prevent ED visits, complicated treatments, and hospitalizations.

Challenges

Obstacles to research into oral health services for people with I/DD

Research is difficult because data isn't standardized

A consistent Medicaid definition of individuals with I/DD does not exist. It isn't possible to confidently analyze dental service for people with I/DD without a consistent definition of the group.

It's difficult for state Medicaid agencies to obtain data about adults with I/DD and their dental care

Oral health providers often don't know if mental, behavioral, or neurodevelopmental disorders have been diagnosed in their patients. Medical and behavioral health providers often don't know what dental procedures their patients receive.

Because of this, it's difficult for state Medicaid agencies to know if adults with I/DD get the dental care they need and about any dental care they receive.

Research is difficult because there's no requirement to report dental utilization data among adults with I/DD who have Medicaid coverage

There's no federal requirement to report dental utilization data for adults with I/DD among those who have Medicaid coverage.

It can be difficult to identify all Medicaid enrollees with I/DD and their utilization in Transformed Medicaid Statistical Information System (T-MSIS) because not all adults with I/DD are enrolled in a waiver program or receive care for their I/DD condition.



Obstacles to better oral health services for people with I/DD

Not enough dental anesthesiologists are available to assist adults with I/DD

There aren't enough dental anesthesiologists or enough dental anesthesiologists accepting Medicaid patients. This increases the wait times for adults with I/DD to receive sedation.

Teledentistry for adults with I/DD can make dental visits possible but hasn't been sufficiently explored

Teledentistry can be helpful if patients with I/DD have dental anxiety. With teledentistry, a ride to get dental care isn't needed.

States have flexibility to determine whether to provide dental care via teledentistry.

Arizona requires Medicaid to reimburse for teledentistry at the same rate as in-office visits.

Some questions about how teledentistry for adults with I/DD are:

- Will training dental care providers to use the technology required for teledentistry help increase teledentistry use for adults with I/DD?
- Do dental care providers need technological devices and support to use teledentistry? Is it expensive for dental care providers to begin using teledentistry?
- Do dental care providers have internet capabilities to use teledentistry?
- Are dental care providers concerned about patient privacy when they use teledentistry?



This Issue Brief presented information on adults with I/DD and their high need for oral health care. It discussed the type of oral health care that adults with I/DD may need and described how some states cover oral health services. It also discusses difficulties with data collection on the oral health of this group and other challenges.

References

To learn more about the sources of information for this Issue Brief, visit MACPAC's [publications page](#).

