

The Surgeon General's 2000 Report notes that oral health is an essential component of the general health and well-being of all Americans (1). Dental conditions such as periodontal (gum) disease, a source of chronic infection and inflammation in the oral cavity, have been associated with atherosclerosis, diabetes, adverse pregnancy outcomes, and increased risk of myocardial infarction and stroke (1,4,5). However, researchers have identified dental care as the most frequently reported unmet health need in national studies of both adult and youth populations (9,10). Although annual dental examinations are an important form of preventive care, approximately 44% of Americans lack dental insurance and may therefore experience difficulties accessing nonemergency dental services (9,11). Researchers have also documented disparities in access and use of dental care for rural populations (12–16). Oral health influences productivity, quality of life, and systemic health (2,3). This may be a result of common pathophysiologic pathways involved in inflammation and altered host response (6). Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in childhood, occurring five to eight times more often than asthma (7,8). Many oral health conditions can be detected early and are preventable with .(appropriate care (9