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# The benefits of implementing a dental wellness strategy

By Timothy Custer, D.D.S.

The connection between oral health and overall health is indisputable, but the benefits from dental wellness programs have flown under the radar. Employers can now take advantage of proactive wellness programs aimed at preventing and improving outcomes.

Research in the group dental market has long suggested that oral health is integral to overall health. There is no doubt about the existence of a direct or dotted line connection between poor oral hygiene and serious medical complications, which can inflate long-term costs for employers and employees alike. The good news is that there is dental coverage available with strong dental wellness programs designed to “nip” dental disease in the bud. These programs can help improve health and demonstrate that the organization cares about the well being of their employees, which also can generate corporate goodwill in the process.

Patient education programs directed at both children and adults can prevent tooth decay and periodontal disease. As a result, the need for a host of more serious and costly reactive measures can be avoided, which might include anything from fillings and crowns, to root canals and gum surgery.

In short, it is critically important to communicate and implement targeted messages to dental plan members who need to know routine cleanings and check-ups can help prevent dental conditions that may contribute to chronic health issues.

## THE LINK BETWEEN ORAL HEALTH AND OVERALL HEALTH

The body of evidence continues to grow supporting the relationship between oral health and overall health.

The most common health conditions linked to oral health include cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, obesity and chronic stress. It is worth noting that researchers at the University of New York at Buffalo found a link to obesity, which they said is a significant predictor for periodontal disease. Of course, obesity triggers conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. Addressing just one of the risks, such as poor dental hygiene, can provide significant benefits by the mere fact that reducing inflammatory conditions in the body can improve overall health.

Additionally, stress was found to weaken the immune system, increase blood pressure, and lead to teeth grinding, which can leave stressed individuals susceptible to developing periodontal disease.

## FORMING A STRATEGIC WELLNESS PROGRAM

Reaching out to those employees in at-risk categories should be at the forefront of an employer’s customized prevention strategy for their dental wellness program that is aimed at changing unhealthy behaviors. Examples of proactive programs might include targeted communications to those in these at-risk-categories. Additional wellness initiatives may include online resources such as an ask-a-dentist feature, risk assessment tools and thought-provoking articles about the connection between dental health and overall health.

## DEEPER BENEFITS ARE THE KEY TO WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The key to success for any dental wellness program is to have in place a deep contract as the foundation for

Dearborn National has mailed more than **400,000** educational flyers in the past two years to a variety of members in various high-risk categories.

the dental plan design. Conventional methods in plan design might include cost-sharing strategies that raise co-pays, co-insurance, maximums and deductibles, which are used often for short-term cost reduction, but may have less effect over the long run. However, dental wellness programs supported by deeper plan designs can result in long-term savings from improved health of insureds. For example, covering sealants for children at 100% and removing the so-called missing tooth exclusion for complex cases can help rein in future costs and maintain good oral health in adulthood.

A dental wellness program can be as preventive and far reaching as an employer wants, but it will not be effective if the contract fails to support key objectives. For example, if the sealant benefit is cut off at too young of an age, the employer will not meet the longer term goal of prevention and cost savings.

### **DEARBORN NATIONAL'S PROACTIVE APPROACH TO DENTAL WELLNESS**

To parents of newborns thinking about the importance of routine cleanings for their children, Dearborn National™ mails a greeting to parents of babies who are about to mark their first birthday. This mailing serves as a reminder to schedule their first checkup if they haven't done so already. Parents of children 6 to 12 years old who have not had any sealants or required a filling within the past year are sent a mailing as part of an educational campaign explaining the importance of sealants for prevention of tooth decay.

In addition, the company sends a mailing about the dangers of periodontal disease to individuals with a

history of periodontal treatment or those who simply have not had a cleaning within the past year.

Dearborn National has mailed more than 400,000 educational flyers in the past two years to a variety of members in various high-risk categories. Within this mailing were dental plan members who had not visited the dentist during the past year. Remarkably, in certain risk populations nearly 40% of members who had not seen a dentist in the past 12 months had done so following receipt of the educational mailer. While this sort of proactive educational outreach might not help diabetics lower their glycemic level, it certainly can put them onto the path of improved outcomes.

At the end of the day, it is a matter of educating employees about the importance of dental health and the impact it may have on more serious health problems down the line. But none of this matters unless the right tools and benefits are in place to educate employees about the link between oral health and overall health, and above all, support their actions.



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