

A person's overall health, health outcomes, and quality of life are influenced by the conditions in the environments in which a person is born, lives, learns, works, plays, and ages. These environmental conditions are referred to as social determinants of health (SDoH). Since oral health is an integral component of overall health, it is important for providers to understand SDoH and how they affect oral health outcomes for the members they serve. Healthy People 2020 has defined the following five key SDoH:

-  Economic stability (employment, food security, poverty)
-  Education (early childhood education and development, high school graduation, literacy)
-  Social and community context (discrimination, incarceration)
-  Health and health care (access to health care, health literacy)
-  Neighborhood and built environment (access to foods that support healthy eating, crime and violence)

Oral health and SDoH

According to the Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS), "There is growing recognition that the places where individuals live, learn, work, and play significantly influence their oral health." This underscores the importance of dental providers understanding SDoH and using this understanding to address oral health disparities in their communities and improve oral health outcomes for the patients they serve.

Dental providers can use one-on-one patient encounters to gather and document information about SDoH in patient records. This information can potentially be used as a starting point for tracking and trending SDoH among the patients seen at a facility. Per CHCS, the following are some specific examples of social determinants that may be related to oral health:

- Health behaviors including fruit/vegetable consumption, tobacco use, and soda consumption
- Lack of reliable transportation or use of public transportation
- Limited English proficiency
- Lack of education
- Lack of affordable/stable housing
- Access to care, including dental care

By gathering this information, dental providers will be better able to identify at-risk patients and provide all patients with person-centered treatment plans that are more likely to produce patient compliance (Tiwari, Palatta, Stewart).

Questions

If you have questions about SDoH and oral health, please contact:

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Sources

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- Tiwari, Tamanna, Anthony Palatta, and Jeffery Stewart, "What is the Value of Social Determinants of Health in Dental Education?" National Academy of Medicine, April 6, 2020, <https://nam.edu/what-is-the-value-of-social-determinants-of-health-in-dental-education>.