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Is It Time to Bring Dental Care Back to Your Facility?

by Aria Care Partners | Jan 12, 2021



The Risks of Delaying Oral Health Measures for Seniors

Skilled nursing facility caregivers were concerned when an 84-year-old resident began exhibiting aggressive behaviors, including hitting, spitting, and sexual disinhibition. He appeared to be in some sort of discomfort but, suffering from advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease, was unable to communicate. Physicians worked to understand how his other conditions (diabetes, hypertension, and chronic kidney disease) could be influencing his behavior but medication adjustments and other treatments provided no lasting change.

After two years, the man had begun biting his own hand, causing significant lacerations. Eventually, a dentist performed an exam and removed three cavities. After extraction, the resident's antisocial behavior abruptly stopped. Years later, his behavior remains "pleasant," according to a paper detailing the case.^[2]

This gentleman's suffering is an example of the avoidable risks that can come with neglected oral health. Preventative care and treatment for dental disease, while it's still in early stages, help mitigate a variety of risks, including:

1. **Systemic Infections.** A review of the research around the link between oral health and infection in elderly residents of chronic care facilities finds that "limit[ing] oral infections will go far to reduce hospital admissions from chronic care facilities and even lower the mortality rate related specifically to systemic bacterial infections in these patients." ^[3]
2. **Complications from Dysphagia.** "Proper Oral Care Can

Reduce Risk of Pneumonia,” an article published in RT magazine, encourages skilled nursing facilities to educate staff on the importance of oral health, noting the risk of hospital admissions for residents with oropharyngeal dysphagia.

This condition hinders the ability to swallow, often leading to serious consequences, including aspiration pneumonia, malnutrition, dehydration, choking, and death. “Effective oral care has been widely accepted as a crucial component in the reduction of aspiration pneumonia, but still, it is often overlooked,” the article states.]

3. General Decline of Good Health. Analyses reported in a 2019 study, “Oral Health as a Gateway to Overall Health and Well-Being: Surveillance of the Geriatric Population in the United States,” shows “statistically significant relationships between oral health, physical, mental and general health, energy levels, depression, and appetite. Out of the 10 systemic diseases being investigated, six of them were directly related to oral health outcome.” [5]

CDC and ADA Compliant Dental Care is Critical for Seniors

According to both the CDC and ADA, leaders in skilled nursing facilities should be mindful that dental care can be provided safely. Delaying that care can create significant risk for elderly residents.

[1] <https://www.ada.org/en/press-room/news-releases/2020-archives/august/american-dental-association-dentistry-is-essential-health-care>

[2] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1479-8301.2011.00374.x>

[3] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111>

/j.1741-2358.1988.tb00318.x

[4] <https://rtmagazine.com/disorders-diseases/infectious-diseases/pneumonia/proper-oral-care-pneumonia/>

[5] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/s>

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