ASTDD Health Impact Snapshot:
Older Adult Oral Health

The Challenge

Tooth decay remains one of the most common and preventable chronic diseases across the lifespan. When left untreated, it can cause significant pain, disrupt daily life, and contribute to broader health problems. Risk for tooth decay increases for some older adults due to several factors, including:

- A reduction in caries-protective saliva flow resulting from medication use
- Diminished oral hygiene capacity due to dexterity or cognitive changes
- Dietary shifts that often coincide with dementia or cancer treatments
- Loss of work-connected dental insurance

These elevated risks drive the increased likelihood of untreated decay, which can lead to serious complications including tooth loss, nutritional deficits, and worsening of dangerous and costly chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. The 2021 report *Oral Health in America: Advances and Challenges* highlights the ongoing barriers some older adults face in achieving good oral health, including limited access to providers and the high cost of care. **Expanding preventive oral health initiatives for older adults is not only vital for health, but also a smart economic investment in the nation's prosperity.**

Partnering to Improve Older Adult Oral Health

The ASTDD Healthy Aging Committee serves as one of the nation's leading convener on oral health for older adults, fostering dialogue and advancing innovative solutions. Its key strategies include:

- Partnering with organizations that promote healthy aging
- Strengthening geriatric oral health training for dental and other health care providers
- Advocating for expanded dental coverage in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicare
- Supporting workforce and technology innovations to overcome access barriers

State and territorial oral health programs can play a pivotal role as partners, coordinators, and conveners in these collaborative efforts—helping drive innovative public health programs that are essential to long-term improvements in the oral health of the growing aging population.

Partners in attendance at committee meetings have included representatives from the Gerontological Society of America, Harvard School of Dental Medicine, Colorado School of Dental Medicine, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, Apple Tree Dental in Minnesota, the Veterans Administration, the Special Care Dentistry Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Association of States United for Aging and Disability Services, and multiple state oral health programs.

Healthy Aging Committee Activities

With the nation's aging population growing rapidly, the committee works to identify best practices, develop tools, and promote policies that address the unique oral health needs of this heterogeneous age group.

To carry out this work, it has developed and shared a variety of key resources and guidance documents, made possible through generous foundation support.

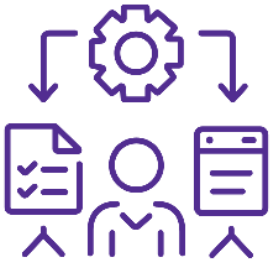
With funding from the Gary and Mary West Foundation:

- Developed *Older Adult Oral Health Resources for Collaboration* (2022)
- Updated Best Practice Approach: *Improving the Oral Health of Older Adults* (2023)

- Produced a Policy Statement: *Older Adults and Oral Health: A Continuing Challenge* (2024)

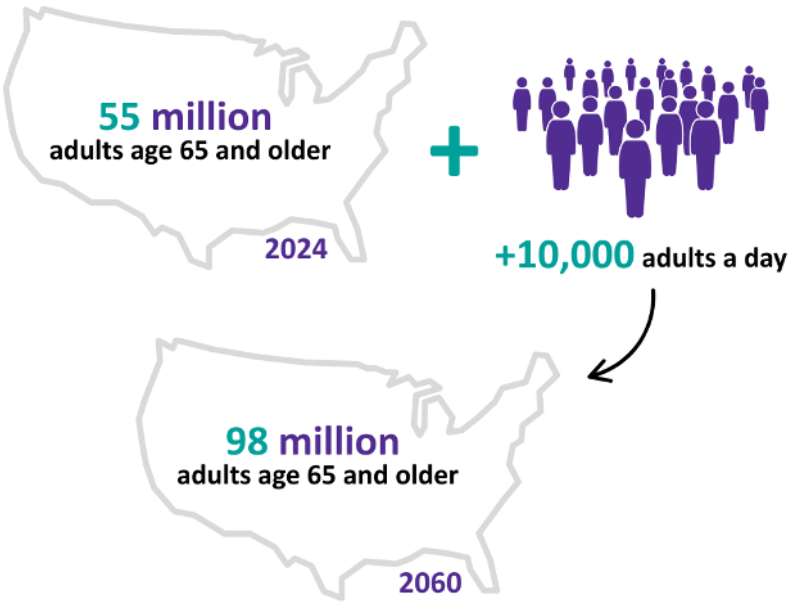
With funding from the Gary and Mary West Foundation and the Delta Dental Community Care Foundation:

- Developing an *Advocacy Guidebook* (available in December, 2025)



Programs and policies that expand access to oral health services for older adults can help prevent costly outcomes—including complications from short-term or serious health conditions, expensive dental treatments, avoidable emergency department visits, and hospitalizations.

In the next 36 years, there will be a 44% increase in adults age 65 and older.



Conclusion and Next Steps

By 2034, older adults will outnumber children in the U.S. for the first time in history. Today, nearly 55 million Americans are 65 and older, with 10,000 more reaching that age every day; by 2060, the number is projected to exceed 98 million.

To meet this growing need, the nation must expand the dental workforce, strengthen partnerships across the health system, and prioritize prevention. Medical-dental integration is especially critical, ensuring open communication among providers who care for older adults.

ASTDD is seeking partners to support our efforts around promoting older adult oral health. Please contact Matt Zaborowski to discuss how you can support ASTDD's efforts to drive these strategies forward and secure better oral health for all older Americans.