Oral Health and Older Adults

Key Points

Good oral health is critically important for older adults.

Epidemiology studies have found a strong association between Periodontal Disease and cardiovascular disease, atherosclerosis, stroke and in the dependent elderly with aspiration pneumonia (Beck & Offenbacher, 2001; Genco, Offenbacher, & Beck, 2002; Jerpenning, 2005).

Individuals living with chronic disease and having poor functional abilities are at a greater risk of having poor oral health. This can serve as a comorbid condition, impacting overall health (Boehm & Scannapieco, 2007).

Assessment

Major oral health risks in older adults include:

- periodontal disease
- cardiovascular disease
- dental caries
- medications which reduce saliva flow
- smoking
- diabetes mellitus
- cancer
- health status, and
- socio-behavioral and environmental factors (i.e. fluoridated water, cultural values, stress, sugar consumption)
Dental Community

It is imperative that the dental community work to overcome barriers preventing older adults seeking oral health care. Designing or redesigning dental offices to meet the specific needs of an aging population, such as:

- improved lighting,
- wider walkways with non-slip flooring,
- exam chairs that allow access, even with older adults with mobility issues,
- video and written educational materials pre and post visit to enhance educational learning, and
- dental home care program(s) for functionally dependent elderly who are aging in place at home

Prevention

Preventative dental care is crucial to reduce the risk of decay and disease in older adults.
Maintenance Care

Regular consistent dental health care is imperative. Barriers that prevent older adults from seeking long term dental health care include:

- Resource limitations: older adults with limited financial resources often have to make choices between dental health care, medications, paying bills and basic needs such as food.
- Human resource limitations: dependent older adults may lack formal or informal caregiver support to assist with proper oral health care, as well, as access to oral health (i.e. transportation to and from the office).
- Solutions: interprofessional team approach can be the solution to these types of problems. For example:
  o utilizing social workers to assist with resource needs;
  o utilizing occupational therapist to assess the older adult's ability to perform activities of daily living, such as tooth brushing;
  o utilizing nursing and occupational therapy to educate formal and informal caregiver to learn proper techniques to assist in daily oral health care needs.

References


