

# New research reveals the missed opportunity of preventative oral care

On 30 November, international consumer health company Haleon and the College of General Dentistry (CGDent) launched the Dental Health Barometer, which provides deep insights into the role of preventative oral healthcare in the UK.

Preventative care is defined as proactive dental care and advice that helps a patient to take action to maintain a healthy mouth, protecting against tooth decay, gum disease and more serious issues such as tooth loss and negative impacts on general health.

Yet, the survey of UK consumers and dental health professionals reveals that preventative oral care advice is not being offered consistently to patients. That's despite a high incidence of tooth decay – with 70,000 people treated in UK emergency departments for the disease in 2022 alone. Just one third (34%) of oral health professionals said they always offer preventative care advice to patients, while one in four (25%) patients said they weren't given preventative advice during their last dental appointment.

Over half (59%) of oral health professionals said that they are more likely to offer preventative advice for private patients than NHS patients, and over a third (37%) of NHS oral health professionals cited time constraints as the top reason for not being able to routinely offer preventative care advice, as opposed to just 15% of private oral health professionals. Though we know oral health professionals are working hard during a time of unprecedented pressure on the UK dental landscape, these figures come as little surprise given the widely reported 'dental



deserts' where some areas of the UK have over 3,000 patients for every NHS dentist.

Additionally, oral health professionals differed on the preventative advice they would recommend to patients. While half (50%) said advice on additional oral hygiene products and brushing techniques were key, only 2 in 5 (41%) pointed to advice on diet as preventative care and just over a third (34%) would consider advice on caring for gums to be preventative advice.

Bas Vorsteveld, General Manager GBI, Haleon, said: 'Our findings revealed preventative care advice is not always offered consistently, despite patients and dentists understanding its importance. We remain committed to addressing these issues and will look to develop new initiatives to support dental professionals.'

'These will form alongside our existing initiatives which include providing educational materials to healthcare professionals,

continuing to innovate and provide therapeutic oral care for patient issues at home and through campaigns like Shine Bright which raises awareness in children of the prevention of oral health conditions.'

The importance of preventative care has already been acknowledged by the Department of Health, through the roll out of the 'Delivering better oral health' toolkit, which was updated in 2021. This aims to provide best practice guidance on routine preventative care. It is encouraging that over a quarter (76%) of oral health professionals surveyed were aware of this toolkit. Younger dentists are more likely to be aware of it, with 82% aged 23–34 were aware compared to 58% of dental health professionals aged 45–54.

The study found patients have a strong level of trust in advice given by their dentist. Where it is offered, 9 in 10 (88%) found the advice helpful. The study found that NHS patients, younger people and men were less likely to proactively ask for preventative care advice.

Dr Abhi Pal, President at CGDent said: 'We are committed to quality and standards of excellence in general practice dentistry – helping professionals to do the best for their patients. The research revealed some fascinating insights into the role that preventative care plays in the UK. It's quite properly a mainstay of both private and NHS appointments, and we support any initiative that promotes prevention.'

For further information and to view the Dental Health Barometer infographic, visit <https://go.nature.com/3uQCwFS>.

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