

US Worker Dental Care Access and Unmet Dental Needs: The National Health Interview Survey 1997 to 2003

Objectives

The Oral Health Care Objectives of Healthy People 2010 indicate a need to increase the proportion of adults who use the oral health care system each year. Millions of Americans suffer from periodontal diseases and other oral conditions, and more than 17 million Americans (including 10 million Americans 65 years or older) have lost all of their teeth. Given the dependence of the US population on employer-provided medical and dental care, it is important to evaluate the access to dental care and the extent of unmet dental needs of US workers. The objective of this study was to determine the proportion of US workers meeting select Healthy People 2010 oral health care objectives.

Methods

The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) is a continuous multipurpose and multistage probability area survey of the US civilian non-institutionalized population living at addressed dwellings. Each week, a probability sample of households is interviewed by trained personnel to obtain information about the characteristics of each member of the household. Gender and race-specific analyses by occupation were conducted on >135,000 US worker participants in the 1997-2003 NHIS Surveys. Participants were asked: "About how long has it been since you last saw or talked to a dentist? Include all types of dentists such as orthodontist, oral surgeons, and all other dental specialists as well as dental hygienists." Participants were also asked: "During the past 12 months, was there any time when you needed dental care (including check-ups) but didn't get it because you couldn't afford it?"

Results

Among the 66,616 male and the 68,388 female worker NHIS participants, the prevalence of no dental visit in the previous 12 months ranged from 19-58% and 18-50%, by 41 occupational groups, respectively. Occupations in which the majority of male workers had not seen a dentist in the past year included: Forestry and fishing occupations, Construction laborers, and Farm workers and other agricultural workers, Food service workers, and Freight and stock material handlers. Nearly 10% of male Farm workers reported never having seen a dentist. Half of the female Construction laborers reported no dental care access in the previous year; nearly 4% of female Farm workers reported never having been to the dentist. Occupations for female workers with reported highest rates of unmet dental needs ranging between 19-27% included: Construction and extractive trade workers (26.8%), Construction laborers (24.2%), and Food service workers (19.8%). The highest rates of reported unmet dental needs among male workers were reported by Health service workers (17.1%), Food service workers (14.8%), and Forestry and fishing occupations (13.8).

Conclusion

Among 68,293,862 male and 58,676,455 female US workers employed between 1997-2003, dental care access is sub-optimal and unmet dental needs are significant for several major US worker groups. Strategies to increase regular dental visits, as well as bridge the gap of unmet dental needs, among US worker groups are paramount. Continued surveillance of unmet dental needs and oral health care utilization using the NHIS is needed to identify worker groups and other sub-groups of the US population who continue to fall well below Healthy People 2010 objectives for Oral Healthcare. Such surveillance is also essential for providing information to both employers and health care policy analysts seeking to improve access to oral health care for all Americans.