

ORAL HEALTH SELF-CARE: FOR THE PUBLIC (AND BEYOND)



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Oral health has a very simple, very powerful and very effective message, with great scientific evidence: *Brush your teeth at least twice a day, in the morning and before bed, with a fluoridated toothpaste and a soft-bristled brush.*



Health professionals and society often lose sight of this simple message. We often forget the obvious in this regard... As is sometimes the case with other fundamental aspects of our lives.

We have a long way to go at global and local level in terms of its widespread adoption. Improving oral health indicators basically involves the community and individuals internalising this concept.

Taking care of our health, both physical and mental, is fundamental to living a full and happy life. However, we often neglect one crucial area of our overall well-being: oral health.

The truth is that oral health cannot be overlooked, as it is closely linked to our general health. Problems such as cavities, gingivitis and periodontitis not only cause pain and discomfort, but can lead to more serious complications such as tooth loss, infections and even systemic diseases.

This is where the concept of self-care in health comes in. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), self-care encompasses all the activities that individuals, families and communities carry out to promote health, prevent illness and cope with disease, with or without the support of a health professional.

In the context of oral health, self-care practices are especially important, as our daily oral hygiene habits have a direct impact on the health of our mouth and, consequently, on our general health.

So, what does oral health self-care consist of?

A series of simple but fundamental daily practices to maintain oral hygiene and prevent medical and dental problems. As already mentioned, these include

1. Brush your teeth at least twice a day, in the morning and before going to bed, with a fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristled brush. It is essential to brush all the surfaces of the teeth, as well as the tongue, to remove bacteria and food debris.

And also,

2. Use dental floss or dental tape daily to clean the interdental spaces, where the toothbrush cannot reach, thus removing plaque and food debris.

3. Adopt a healthy diet, limiting the consumption of sugary foods and drinks that contribute to the development of tooth decay, including foods rich in nutrients that contribute to oral health, such as fruit, vegetables and dairy products.

4. Make regular visits to the dentist/oral hygienist at least every six months, or for as long as the dentist determines. In this way, any dental problems can be detected and treated early.

5. Avoid excessive alcohol consumption and the use of tobacco products, which can cause oral cancer, gum disease and tooth loss, among other serious problems.

And what are the benefits of oral health self-care?

In addition to preventing common dental problems such as tooth decay, gingivitis and halitosis (bad breath), oral health self-care has numerous benefits for our lives and for society in general.

1. Significant economic savings

By preventing dental problems through regular self-care, it is possible to avoid the high costs associated with treatments and rehabilitation procedures, such as fillings, root canal treatments, extractions and the placement of dental implants and other rehabilitation procedures.

2. Increased productivity

Good oral health can reduce the number of working or school days lost due to dental problems. Studies show that over-the-counter oral health products have resulted in approximately 40.8 billion productive days globally, equivalent to a welfare effect of 1.879 billion dollars.

3. Improved quality of life

Effective oral health self-care can lead to an estimated gain of 22 million quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) worldwide, reflecting better health status and reduced disability.

Several factors have contributed to the WHO's emphasis on the importance of self-care in oral health:

• Understanding individual behaviour

Recognition of the crucial role of individual behaviour in disease prevention and management has grown, supported by the World Health Organization's (WHO) focus on healthy behaviours and patient empowerment.

• Person-centred care

The emphasis on health literacy and empowerment is essential to enable individuals to take care of their oral health in an autonomous and informed way.

• Digital tools

The proliferation of digital tools, such as mobile applications and online resources, has expanded access to oral health information and services. However, improvements are needed to ensure equity in access to digital health, particularly in poorer communities.

To maximize the benefits of oral health self-care, it is essential to create an enabling environment, based on four main approaches:

1. Support and adoption from all stakeholders

Broad support from patients, consumers, healthcare professionals, regulators and policymakers is essential to maximise the adoption and value of oral health self-care products and behaviours.

2. Empowering consumers and patients

Empowering consumers and patients to understand their oral health, make informed decisions and use certified self-care products with confidence is crucial to the success of this approach.

3. Self-care health policy

Policymakers' recognition of the economic value of products used in oral health self-care practices can foster policies that promote self-care as an affordable and sustainable health solution.

4. Regulatory frameworks

Effective regulations are needed to drive innovation, empower consumers and extract maximum value from self-care products for health systems.

Self-care is critical for healthy ageing, aligning with WHO resolutions on aging and health, primary health care and oral health.

In addition, self-care contributes directly to several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including:

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Goal 1: Eradicate poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and between countries.

A comprehensive international focus on self-care, along the lines of the WHO recommendations, could foster the momentum needed to fully integrate self-care into health systems for the benefit of individuals and society.

Therefore, to get the most out of oral health self-care, it is essential to develop an effective policy framework that includes the following elements:

- Clear definition of self-care and its value for national health systems, governments and person-centred approaches.
- Encouraging member states to develop and implement national self-care strategies, guidelines or plans that address key enablers.
- Guidance to member states on aligning resources, investments and policies to support a harmonised national self-care strategy.

Therefore, to effectively integrate self-care into their health systems, Member States must:

- Improve public health literacy and education by implementing awareness campaigns on self-care interventions for health and well-being.
- Integrate and expand digital health tools for self-care in national health and social care systems.
- Develop the capacity of health and social care professionals in relation to self-care by incorporating self-care practices into training modules and national guidelines.
- Recognise self-care as a critical and transversal component of the care continuum and a facilitator of Universal Health Coverage.
- Invest in policies that promote self-care practices as a means of reducing health expenditure and addressing gaps in the workforce.

Conclusion:

Oral health self-care represents a valuable opportunity to improve the sustainability of health systems, health outcomes and the quality of life of individuals. By adopting a comprehensive policy framework and promoting self-care practices, health systems can become more efficient and resilient, ultimately contributing to achieving the goal of Universal Health Coverage.

Self-care empowers individuals, relieves pressure on healthcare providers and generates significant economic savings. Embracing self-care as a core component of healthcare delivery will require coordinated efforts from policymakers, healthcare professionals and civil society at large. By fostering an environment conducive to self-care, we can build healthier communities and sustainable health systems for the future.

The dentist has a key role to play in this approach. We must never lose sight of this. ■

