

## Perceived Oral Health Status Among Adults with Teeth in the United States, 1988–94

### Why is information on self-identified oral health status important?

In the report on *Oral Health in America*, the U.S. Surgeon General has called for additional efforts to identify and reduce oral health disparities within the United States. Although the utilization of dental care in the United States has improved over the past 20 years, significant differences in oral health utilization continue to exist. There are many well-studied indicators that promote dental care utilization, such as dental insurance coverage and distance to dental providers. Another important factor in understanding the determinants of dental care utilization is an individual's perception of his own dental condition. Because it is widely accepted among dental public health experts that increasing dental care utilization promotes improvement in the oral health status of our communities, examining adults' perception of their oral health status will provide important information that should lead to improvements in the public's oral health.

### Perceived oral health status information from the third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III)

Data from NHANES III (1988–94) can be used to obtain estimates of perceived oral health status in the civilian, noninstitutionalized population of the United States. Information on perceived oral health status was obtained by trained interviewers during the administration of a comprehensive questionnaire in the respondent's home. Trained dentists collected information on clinical dental status during a comprehensive dental exam at a NHANES Mobile Examination Center.

### What does NHANES III data indicate about perceived oral health status?

Approximately one-third of Americans 20 years of age or older describe the condition of their natural teeth as either "poor" or "fair"; the remaining two-thirds report the condition of their natural teeth as being good, very good, or excellent (table 1). Older Americans (65–99 years of age) are twice as likely to report the condition of their natural teeth as "poor" compared with individuals 20–39 years of age (18 percent vs. 9 percent). Perception of oral health status also varies among race/ethnic groups. A majority of Mexican Americans describe the condition of their natural teeth as either "fair" or "poor" (37 and 18 percent, respectively) with nearly one-half of non-Hispanic black persons reporting either "fair" or "poor" (30 and 16 percent, respectively) oral health status. Among non-Hispanic white persons, less than one-third describe the condition of their natural teeth as "fair" or "poor" (20 and 11 percent, respectively). Individuals not graduating from high school are nearly three times as likely to describe the condition of their natural teeth as "poor" compared with those who complete high school (24 percent vs. 9 percent) and a majority of individuals below 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Line reported that the condition of their natural teeth is either "fair" or "poor" (31 and 22 percent, respectively).

A majority of adult Americans report that they need to have some type of dental treatment (table 2). Nearly one-third of adults (32 percent) report that they need dental fillings or teeth replaced with dental restorations and 10 percent report that they need to have a tooth extracted. Younger adults are more likely to report perceived treatment needs. Nearly one-fifth (19 percent) of adults 20–39 years of age report needing teeth filled or replaced with dental

**Table 1. Percent distribution of perceived condition of natural teeth among adults by selected sociodemographics: United States, 1988–94**

Measure	Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
Percent distribution					
Total	11	18	36	23	12
Age					
20–39 years	13	20	35	22	9
40–64 years	10	17	37	22	14
65 years and over	8	14	34	26	18
Race/Ethnicity					
Non-Hispanic white	13	20	36	20	11
Non-Hispanic black	7	13	33	30	16
Mexican American	6	9	30	37	18
Poverty status					
Federal Poverty Line:					
Less than 100 percent	7	11	30	31	22
101–200 percent	7	11	34	30	18
More than 200 percent	14	22	37	18	9
Completed high school					
No	5	9	32	31	24
Yes	13	21	37	20	9

**Table 2. Percent of dentate persons reporting perceived dental treatment needs by age: United States, 1988–94**

Measure	20–39 years	40–64 years	65–99 year	Total
Perceived treatment needs				
Need teeth filled or replaced	19	11	2	32
Need teeth extracted	6	3	*	10
Need gum treatment	3	2	*	6
Need ortho/cosmetic work	5	2	*	7
Need dental cleaning	14	8	2	24
Need no dental treatment	18	16	7	41

\*Estimates do not meet standards for reporting.  
NOTE: Categories do not add to 100 percent.

restorations compared with 11 percent of 40–64-year-olds and only 2 percent of adults 65 years of age or older. Among all adults with teeth, nearly 2 percent report needing relief from pain (data not shown). NHANES data can also be used to discuss the relationship between clinical exam findings that indicate a treatment need and perceived treatment needs. Among individuals with 3 or more teeth with untreated decay (cavities), 39 percent describe the condition of their natural teeth as “poor” (table 3). Nearly three-fourths of individuals with no untreated decay report the condition of their natural teeth to be “good,” “very good,” or “excellent” (38, 23, and 14 percent, respectively).

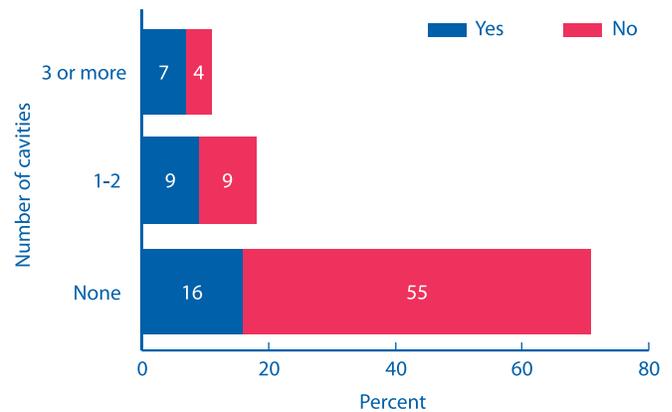
Determining if self-assessment of dental treatment needs reasonably correspond to clinical indication of treatment needs is an important public health research activity and has significance for addressing dental health policy issues for communities. Results from surveys on perceived treatment needs may be useful for assessing a community’s need for

**Table 3. Percent distribution of perceived condition of natural teeth among adults by untreated tooth decay status: United States, 1988–94**

Measure teeth	No untreated decay	1–2 decay teeth	3 or more decay teeth
Perceived condition of teeth			
Excellent	14	5	*
Very good	23	9	4
Good	38	35	22
Fair	19	32	34
Poor	6	19	39

\*Estimates do not meet standards for reporting.

**Figure 1. Percent of dentate persons reporting perceived treatment needs for fillings or other restorative dental work by tooth decay status: United States, 1988–94**



dental professional services. While 55 percent of dentate adults with no tooth decay accurately report no need for dental fillings or other restorative work, 16 percent do report such a need for fillings (figure 1). Among those with at least 1 tooth with untreated decay, 13 percent reported no need for dental fillings or other restorative treatment, whereas, 16 percent reported such a need for fillings or restorative dental care.

## Summary

Perceived oral health data provide additional information that will improve our understanding of some of the motivating factors that influence individuals’ decisions to seek dental care. The NHANES data presented here describe the patterns and distributions of adults’ self-assessments of dental treatment needs in the United States and can contribute to dental public health policy discussions.

**For more information about NHANES please visit our Web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhanes.htm>**