



# Registered Dental Hygienists Are Essential Primary Health Care Professionals



Oral health is essential to overall health. It is well established that poor oral health is associated with a host of health conditions such as diabetes, aspiration pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease, and immune-mediated inflammatory diseases (e.g., arthritis).<sup>1</sup> As the prevalence of some of these chronic conditions in older adults (over 65) is very high (e.g., diabetes 26.8%, heart disease 27%), it is critical that continuous comprehensive dental hygiene care be available to the population.<sup>2</sup>

In Canada, registered dental hygienists are in a prime position, as regulated health care professionals, to prevent and treat oral diseases through evidence-informed practice, promote oral health, and foster informed decision making related to oral health by their clients. Dental caries is the most common, yet preventable, chronic disease in the world.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, 52% of Canadians ages 65 and older suffer from periodontal (gum) disease that, if left untreated, can lead to tooth loss and negatively impact many aspects of their health.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, dental hygienists, as primary health care professionals, play a critical role in public and population health and should be considered essential workers.

Essential dental hygiene care includes any oral care and oral health education provided to individuals, families or communities that prevents and eliminates infection and disease of the mouth and associated structures. These interventions also allow individuals to maintain functions, such as eating, talking, and smiling, and contribute to overall health and well-being, and quality of life.

For residents in long-term care, dental hygiene services and individualized daily mouth care are essential to their health and well-being as they are at much higher risk for developing infectious diseases, such as SARS-CoV-2, due to their often suppressed immune systems. Dental hygienists are integral members of interprofessional health care teams working to provide comprehensive standards of care, supporting pain-free eating, speaking, and socializing, and providing vital oral health education and training to residents, caregivers, and family members.

CDHA asks government to include registered dental hygienists as essential primary health care providers during this, or any future, public health emergency. In order for dental hygienists to provide optimal care within the scope of their practice, they require access to government supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and primary access to vaccines alongside other essential workers. Oral health has an enormous impact on the overall health of the population. By recognizing registered dental hygienists as essential workers, government will help to ensure the health and safety of dental hygienists—primary care providers—and the public they serve.

1. Lavigne SE, Forrest JL. An umbrella review of systematic reviews of the evidence of a causal relationship between periodontal microbes and respiratory diseases: Position paper from the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. *Can J Dent Hyg.* 2020;54(3):144–155. Available from: <https://files.cdha.ca/profession/journal/2735.pdf>
2. Government of Canada. *Prevalence of Chronic Diseases and Risk Factors among Canadians Aged 65 Years and Older* [Internet]. c2020 [cited 2020 Dec 3]. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/publications/diseases-conditions/prevalence-chronic-disease-risk-factors-canadians-aged-65-years-older.html>
3. Government of Canada. *Canadian Health Measures Survey, 2007–2009* [Internet]. c2010 [cited 2020 Dec 3]. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/healthy-living/reports-publications/oral-health/canadian-health-measures-survey.html>