



11 Ways to Find Free or Affordable Dental Care

June 06, 2017
by Zawn Villines
997 views



It's shocking how closely linked your dental health is to your overall health. Gum disease, particularly when chronically left untreated, can lead to cardiovascular problems. Dental infections can even be fatal when they travel to the brain or other organs.

You might think your health insurance will cover dental care. Think again. Insurers only have to cover dental care for children. That leaves many people struggling to fund the costs of care. With exams costing

\$100 or more and dental work easily exceeding \$1,000, inability to afford dental care can become a matter of life and death.

You might be wondering whether dental and oral care is even that crucial to your health. Would it hurt that much to just avoid it? We asked Dr. Gary Glassman, a dentist and oral fitness expert, for his professional opinion.

"To be blunt, YES it can," said Glassman. "Not taking care of your oral health can lead to major health problems such as cardiovascular disease, dementia, respiratory infections, diabetic complications, and others."

As anyone who's ever had a toothache can attest, it's virtually impossible to focus on anything but the pain. Never mind endlessly calling dentists to see who can see you for a discount. Don't give up. The following resources can help you access affordable dental care.

1. State Oral Health Programs

Various state governments offer oral health programs, though the [availability](#) and cost of such programs depend on state funding. These programs can connect you with local resources and provide information about quality dental care.

2. Medicare and Medicaid

Medicare only covers dental procedures that are part of a larger medical procedure, such as reconstructing the jaw after an injury. Federal law specifically prohibits Medicare from covering routine dental procedures. Medicare recipients may, however, be eligible to apply for Medicaid. Medicaid provides coverage for [some emergency dental services](#). It also covers dental care for recipients under the age of 21. Because Medicaid recipients are low-income, they may be able to access other state resources. Visit your local Medicaid office to explore other programs for which you might be eligible.

3. Emergency Room

It's not an ideal strategy, but sometimes it's the only option.

Emergency rooms can't turn people away when they're in need of emergency care. They can manage some dental emergencies such as a broken tooth, a severe abscess, or intense pain. In most cases, the doctor will only stabilize you. That means giving antibiotics, stopping the bleeding, or offering painkillers—not treating the underlying problem. However, if your dental problem is severe enough to land you in the emergency room, the provider you see there may be able to refer you to a low-cost dental clinic.

"Even though the ER is not the best place to get dental care, you won't be the only person in the ER with a dental problem," said Glassman. "American Dental Association shows that every 15 seconds, someone pays a visit to the ER with an aching tooth."

4. Community Health Centers

Community health centers are funded by the federal government's Health Resources and Services Administration. Some [community health centers](#) offer dental care, especially for dental emergencies and chronic oral health issues. You may need to be put on a waitlist or show up early and wait in line on a clinic day.

5. Dental Schools

Future dentists need practice. Under the supervision of licensed dentists, many dentists-in-training offer care to people in need of free or low-cost dental care. There are many [programs](#) accredited by the American Dental Association. Availability depends on the dental program you choose, and may also depend on your specific dental needs. Few dental schools, for example, offer oral surgery.

6. Dental Hygienist Schools

If you need a routine cleaning rather than emergency care or a filling, consider reaching out to the [American Dental Hygienists' Association](#) . They can connect you with a dental hygienist school, where future hygienists in need of practice offer cleanings under the direction of licensed hygienists or dentists.

7. Low-Cost Clinic Listings

Some [dental clinics](#) , including private clinics not funded through government programs, provide free or low-cost care. Care may only be available on certain days, for certain services, or with proof of low income.

"Dental students need to acquire on-the-job training and experience before they can be licensed," said Glassman. "It's not necessarily free, but most schools work on a sliding scale basis so it's always very affordable."

Other Options for Funding Care

Private clinics and government-funded providers are typically the most affordable options. They may also require you to jump through some hoops. If you are ineligible for these programs, there may be other options for getting care.

8. Sliding Scale Dentistry

Many dentists entered the field because they wanted to help people. That's why some dentists offer a limited number of free or sliding-scale slots. Let your dentist know you are struggling, and ask if they have any programs available that could help you address your dental needs.

9. Negotiated Rates With Your Dentist

If your dentist primarily relies on insurance payments, she may have negotiated rates in place with each insurance plan. Ask if you can

receive the negotiated rate in return for paying in cash. This rate can offer a significant discount. If you're able to save a little money or put your care on a credit card, the negotiated rate may help you squeeze dental care into a tight budget.

10. Financing and Payment Plans

If you have a regular income but can't afford a big expense all at once, a payment plan might be your best option. Some dental offices allow patients to pay a little bit each month over time. Others offer financing through local banks or credit unions. Ask your dentist if financing is an option to fund your dental care.

11. Care Prioritization

Many people with low incomes delay dental care for years. The result is a complex array of dental needs that can cost thousands of dollars. If you find yourself in this situation, ask your dentist to work with you to prioritize the most essential care. A cleaning, for example, may be less important than an extraction. If you can't afford a root canal, removing the tooth may be a more affordable option. Request a clear timeline so you know how long you can delay care, and then plan accordingly. In conjunction with financing, negotiated rates, and diligent saving, prioritizing some care while delaying other care may help you regain control over your dental health.

Dental care might seem like a luxury. It's not. It's a vital ingredient in the recipe for good health. You deserve quality care, even if you can't afford it. Invest in your health by taking the time to explore your options.

Looking for a dentist or want to review your dentist? We at CareDash can help you [find](#) them.

Expert Bio:

As one of the leading global Oral Fitness™ Experts, Dr. Gary Glassman (“Dr. G”) knows that good oral fitness is more than just healthy, attractive teeth and gums. Dr. Glassman became a dentist in 1984 and advanced to specializing in endodontics, also known as root canal treatment in 1987. He maintains a busy private practice and with his partners, sees more than 8,000 patients a year. In private practice since 1987, Dr. Gary Glassman D.D.S, FRDC(c) maintains his practice, Endodontic Specialists in Toronto, Canada. For further information, please visit www.drgaryglassman.com , or on [Facebook](#) , [Twitter](#) , [YouTube Channel](#) , and [LinkedIn](#) .

About the Author



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Zawn Villines is an Atlanta writer and journalist who specializes in health and science.

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