



2023 Oral Healthcare Report:

Understanding patient habits
and the dental care landscape



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Introduction

At Denplan, part of Simplyhealth, we know how vital it is for people to have regular visits to the dentist to maintain healthy teeth and gums.

We are the leading dental payment plan provider, and work with more than 6,600 dentists who care for around 1.4 million patients across the UK.

Denplan's annual Oral Healthcare Report is one of the most comprehensive surveys into UK patient attitudes and habits.

From how often adults and children are brushing, to issues like access, cost and even children's dental appointment tips, we explore the biggest talking points in UK dentistry.

Dentistry has been a prominent fixture in the UK media and within government discussions, particularly in the past year. The UK dental sector crisis has left many patients struggling to have their basic needs met, with some groups in society far worse off than others.

“ Our survey asked over 5,000 UK adults about dental attendance. Sadly, it was revealed that almost a quarter (23%) of those surveyed visit the dentist less often than every two years, only when in pain, or not at all. ”

Cost of living pressures have understandably led to prevention slipping down people's list of priorities. Sadly, many people cancelled appointments because they couldn't afford them, then later paid for emergency treatment when problems had worsened.

It's positive news that over a third of respondents see dental visits as important for their general health. Denplan aims to encourage and support patients to do what they can to avoid dental pain and maintain healthy teeth and gums throughout their lives. The patient-dentist relationship is often very highly valued, with as many as 41% of over 55s stating they've had the same dentist for over ten years. 59% say they see the same dentist more consistently than they see the same GP.

Regular visits are an opportunity to discuss any changes in health with a trusted professional, an important tool in guarding against ill health. In fact, over a quarter (28%) of adults said they have spoken to their dentist about problems other than their oral health. Dentists can spot signs of a variety of health conditions during routine appointments and may refer patients on to other health professionals for further diagnosis.

Access to NHS dentistry remains a challenge for many and among those who currently see an NHS dentist, an increasing number would now consider private dentistry (61%), particularly if struggling to get an NHS appointment, or if it meant getting faster treatment. While we know that access to dentistry is going to be challenging for some time, this report provides us with information that should help guide thinking from all stakeholders to make sure patients are at the heart of all decision making.

Catherine Rutland,
Clinical Director, Denplan and Simplyhealth

How often are Brits visiting their dentist?

We all know early intervention and preventative care are important for good oral health. However, this year's survey shows a concerning downturn in the number of UK adults visiting their dentist or hygienist regularly, with 23% visiting less than every two years, only when they're in pain, or not at all.



Cost concerns appear to be a barrier to regular attendance. With many already facing rising living costs, it's no surprise that many choose to postpone or cancel dental appointments, even though it could mean costlier treatments in the future.

Younger, working age adults were most likely to put off oral healthcare. At least 40% of those under-55 said they had cancelled a dental appointment because they couldn't afford it.

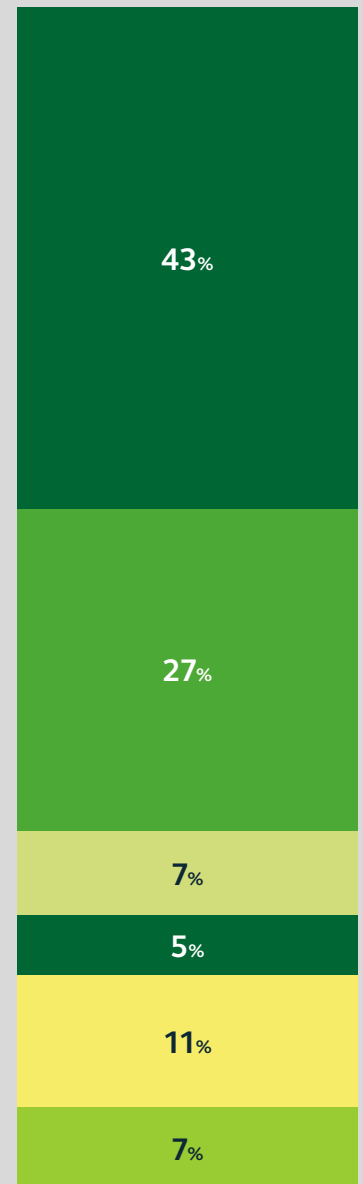
Compared with last year's data (20%), attendance frequency has declined slightly, with 23% now visiting less than every two years, when they're in pain, or not at all.¹

Cancelling routine appointments could prove to be a false economy as at least 54% of under-55s stated they needed emergency dental treatment for themselves or a dependent in the last year.

More than half of adults pay for dental care as it's received, which means it's difficult for them to budget for it over the course of a year. Spreading the cost through a dental payment plan is a great way to avoid sudden, unexpected expenses.



70% of Brits say they see their dentist every six-to-twelve months:



- At least every 6 months
- At least once a year
- At least once every two years
- Less often than once every two years
- Only when in pain
- Never



At the other end of the scale, 7% say that they never visit the dentist.



Our report found that 56% of adults who attend the dentist at least every two years said they would consider a dental payment plan.

An even higher percentage (68%) of those aged 18 to 34 were open to the idea of a dental payment plan, perhaps because this age group is more accustomed to subscribing to services such as streaming and home deliveries.⁵

Oral health and the appearance of our teeth are important to us, with a quarter of adults saying they don't like to show their teeth when they smile and 17% reporting that their teeth affect their self-esteem.

We know there is increasing interest in teeth straightening, with internet searches for 'invisible' teeth aligners up by around 75% in the last five years (Google, 2023). Tooth whitening is the most common treatment patients say they have travelled abroad for (29%).

However, gum disease and tooth decay are by far the most significant concerns for patients, at 35% each.

Regular, preventative appointments allow your dentist to spot the signs of a variety of health conditions, helping you to maintain your general health.

Attitudes to private dentistry and wider health outcomes

More than a third of respondents said dentist visits were important for their health, making them comparable to GP visits. Almost six in 10 (59%) Brits say they see the same dentist more consistently than they see the same GP.

A consistent patient-dentist relationship was very highly valued, with 41% of over-55s saying they'd been with their dentist for 10+ years. Adults visiting their dentist at least every two years cited quality of care (92%), trust (91%) and value for money (84%) among the most important factors when choosing a dentist.

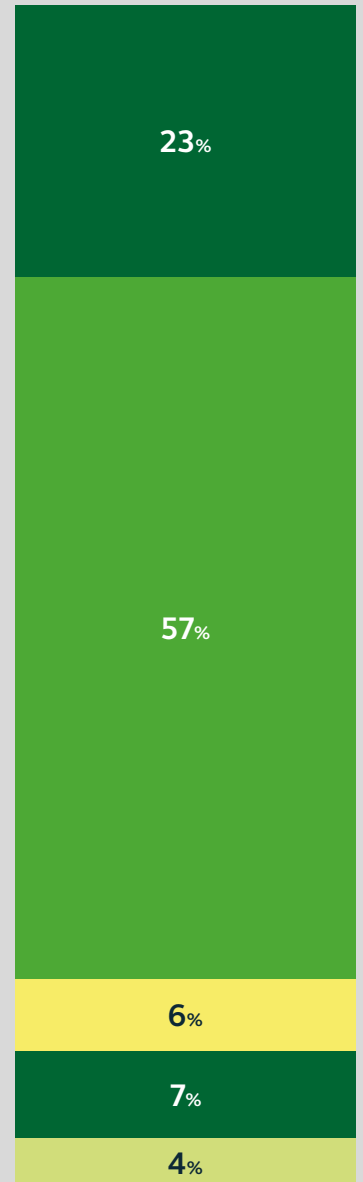
The findings showed that 15% of dental patients had been referred to another healthcare professional by their dentist, with skin conditions being the most common reason.

The regular opportunity to discuss any changes to your health with a trusted professional is an important tool in guarding against ill health.

In fact, 28% of adults said they have spoken to their dentist about problems other than their oral health.



Just 7% of Brits who regularly attend the dentist spread the cost using a monthly payment plan:



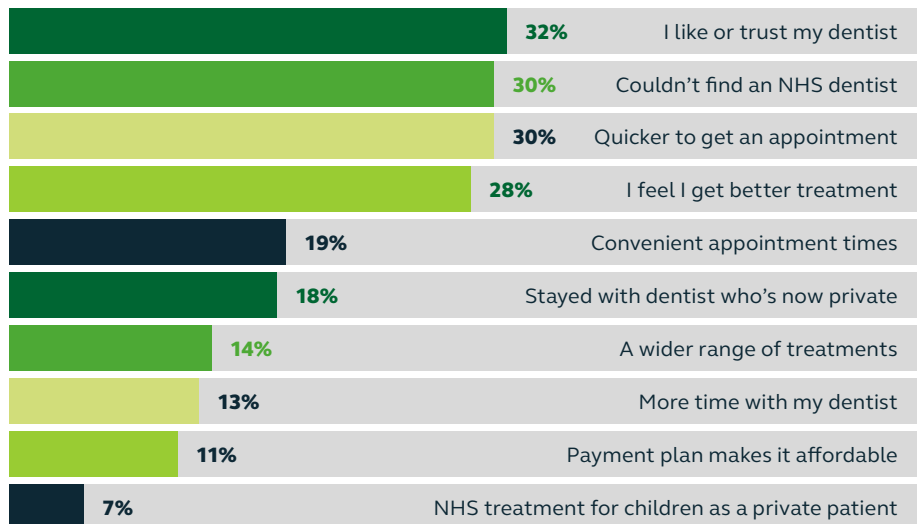
- Do not pay / exempt / receive dental care through NHS
- Pay for check-up / treatments as they are received
- Pay dentist and reclaim costs from cash plan or insurance plan
- Monthly payment plan
- Pay to be registered with dentist then pay for check-ups / treatment



Top reasons for choosing a private dentist



Here are the main reasons patients chose a private dentist:



For some, it came down to convenience (19%), speed of access (30%) and more time available with the dentist for each appointment (13%), while others simply came to private dentistry because they were unable to find an NHS dentist (30%).

An increasing number of those who currently visit an NHS dentist, say they would now consider private treatment (61%). Those who would consider going private are most likely to do so if they are unable to get an NHS appointment (38%) or if it meant faster treatment (36%). The majority of those who said they would not consider private dentistry perceive it as too expensive (62%).

Those with a dental payment plan said they'd chosen this option to help spread the cost of their treatments (42%) and that it helped them to budget for dental costs (36%). Many felt it gave them peace of mind (30%) or helped them to be more proactive about their oral health (26%).

Lack of affordable access and the patient impact



Hannah (25), Ashford
Self-employed dog walker

“

I'm self-employed so don't get sick pay, and don't get paid if I can't work. My toothache was debilitating.

After a root canal with a NHS dentist went wrong, I was left in excruciating pain for days. I was stressed about losing clients and unable to eat. I eventually paid £650 for an emergency weekend dentist appointment.

The total cost of this ordeal, including NHS treatment, emergency care, and private dental fixes reached £3,000. As a single mother who doesn't earn a lot, this put a huge strain on my finances.

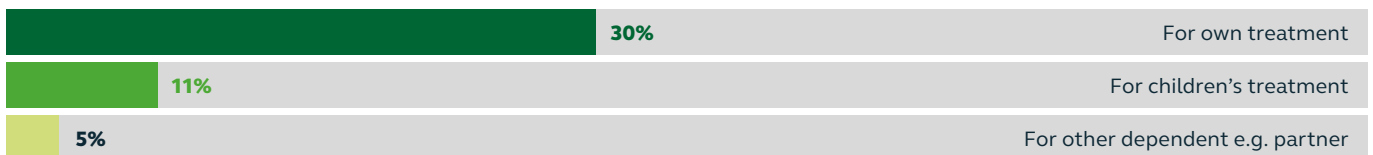
I'm so lucky that the private dentist offered me a discount and we set up a payment plan, helping me to spread the cost.

I've now got a Denplan subscription to manage my future dental costs, and a bit more peace of mind in accessing dental care in general.

”



Of those who needed emergency treatment, 46% needed to take time away from work:





Dr Jignesh Panchal

Smile Oral Care,
Cambridgeshire

Pain impacts overall health and wellbeing, and in many cases interrupts school or work until resolved.

A quarter of all Brits, and a third aged 18-55, said they'd taken time off work at some point due to dental pain. A fifth (21%) needed to take up to a whole week off. Our work with the CIPD shows that workplace absence due to sickness (of many kinds) is at its highest in a decade.¹

Trust and care quality play a huge role in patients' choice of dentist, but what happens when you really need treatment and can't access it?

An increasing number of people are turning to the internet to research symptoms and in some extreme cases, remedy them.

“

I've seen patients who've put off their care for a very long time - one patient, for over a decade. They'd seen a GP for a toothache and been prescribed antibiotics, which didn't help. After suffering for weeks, the patient finally came in and confronted his fears.

He left with a beaming smile, leaving a five-star review on Google, and luckily, we saw him just in time so he didn't have to lose a tooth!

”

DIY and 'dental tourism'

In our survey, a massive 41% of respondents had travelled abroad for dental care, attempted some form of DIY dentistry by ordering at-home kits, or searched Google for dental advice.

The potential for misinformation and errors in self-diagnosis is alarming and makes access to qualified, experienced dentists across the UK all the more important. Some patients are choosing to travel abroad for both cosmetic and restorative treatments, mostly to save money.

Of respondents who travelled abroad for treatment, they only saw a success rate of 50%. Where treatment abroad is unsuccessful, it can lead to the need for follow-up care at home. Seeing a UK dentist in the first place is therefore generally the safer, better-value option.

Improving access: the role of the employer

With access and costs continuing to impact patient attendance levels, employers can play a vital role in supporting employees and their dependants.

Workforce health and wellbeing, morale, and productivity can all be supported by proactive health and wellbeing strategies which focus on prevention, as well as offering health plans which include dental cover.

Brits took 23M sick days due to dental pain last year²



Over a fifth of respondents said they had taken up to a week off work due to dental pain:

What do the numbers say?



Claimed back dental costs

Of those who were covered by an employer funded plan - just 3% overall - 27% pay for and claim back costs, while 34% use a contributory AKA 'salary sacrifice' scheme.

Of those on employer-funded schemes, almost half would wait longer for treatment if the funding stopped and more than one in ten said they'd have trouble affording care without the plan.



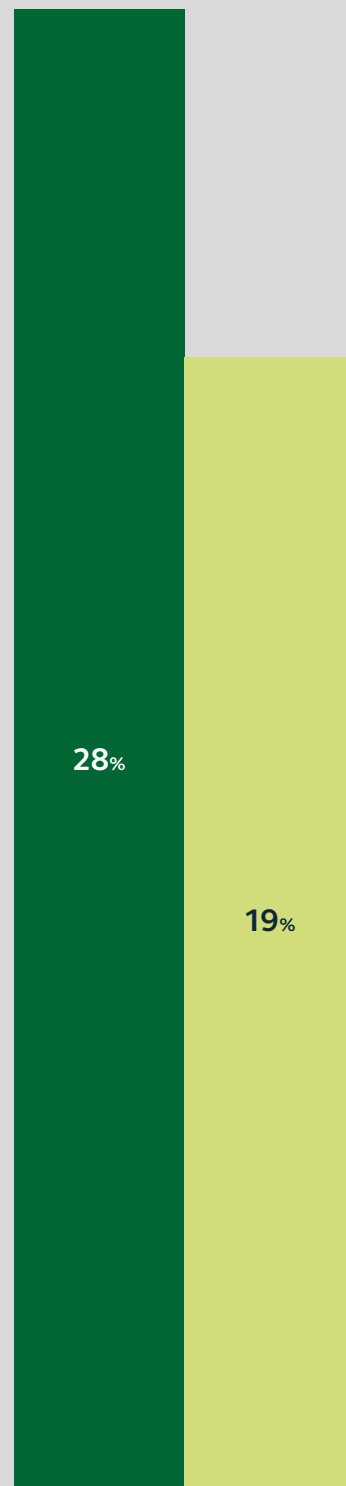
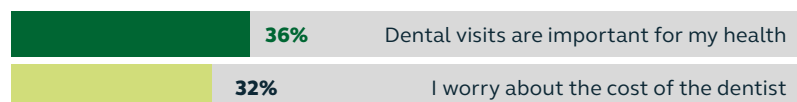
Would consider private

More than six in 10 say they would consider paying for private care, usually when they struggled to get an appointment or could get one faster by going private.



Equivalent to 23M sick days²

Nearly three in ten (28%) surveyed have had to take time off work due to tooth pain, an equivalent of 11.7 million people of working age, and 23 million sick days taken due to dental pain¹.



■ I've taken time off work due to dental pain
■ Dental pain has made me less productive or affected the quality of my work

Children's oral healthcare



Children whose parents regularly visit their dentist, were most likely to be seen by a dentist:

The number one reason for child hospital admissions in the UK is for extractions due to tooth decay.³

Most parents were aware of the importance of looking after their children's teeth: 87% of respondents agreed that good oral health habits in childhood improve lifelong oral health.

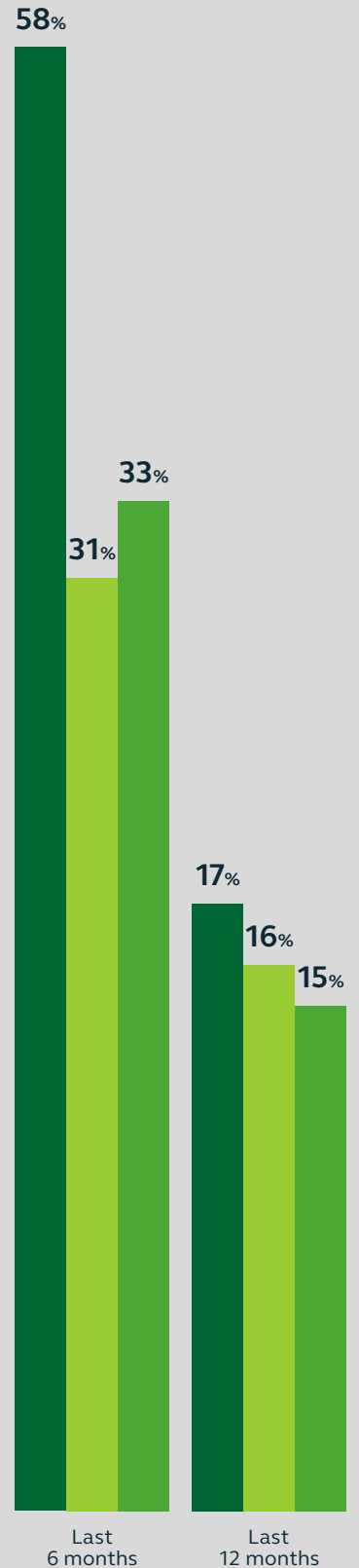
16% of parents said their child had a cavity at some time in the last year, with more than one in 10 (11%) missing school due to dental problems.

Rates of admission in the most deprived communities are almost 3.5 times that of those living in affluent ones.⁶

According to our survey, more than eight in ten (84%) of parents say their children brush their teeth at least twice a day, as recommended by dentists, with 12% brushing only once. Parental involvement is really important in helping young children to establish good oral health habits.

Two thirds of parents said they supervise brushing for children under ten years old and just over half of these had taken, or planned to take, their children to see a dentist before the age of three.

Parents who regularly visit their dentist were most likely to have taken a child in for check-ups in the last six to 12 months (75%), though almost half of those who never visit the dentist themselves had still taken a child.



- Parent regularly visits
- Parent visits less frequently
- Parent never visits dentist

Denplan and Simplyhealth are helping to address oral health disparity amongst children through our Dentaid partnership and their BrightBites oral health education programme.

Volunteers visit schools across the country to spread the message about prevention, toothbrushing, and diet, as well as encouraging parents to take children on regular dentist visits.



Dental habits: embracing a preventative approach

What you need to know about sugar

There's considerable confusion among parents and non-parents alike about how much sugar most foods actually contain. 28% said they didn't know how much sugar an average chocolate bar or a flapjack might contain and 44% guessed well below the true 25-30g figure.

While most parents rightly try to limit their family's sugar consumption, almost half felt their kids still had too many sugary drinks and snacks.

Knowledge of the recommended daily limit is variable at best, with almost 30% of parents admitting they don't know the recommended levels and over half underestimating them.



Children's dental visits

1. What to expect

Aim to bring your child to their first dentist appointment before their first birthday. You'll likely start to see teeth are beginning to appear from six months old. As soon as that first tooth appears, you should aim to brush a child's teeth twice a day.

Primary (AKA 'milk' or 'baby') teeth break through the gums progressively, generally starting at the front of their mouth. By around two, you'll see as many as twenty primary teeth.



2. Your dentist and practice team will:

- Check a child's teeth and gums are healthy
- Count their teeth and check on development
- Give oral health care tips and demonstrate brushing techniques
- Teach you how to best care for a child's teeth and usually recommend supervised brushing
- Provide dietary advice on healthy food and drinks (see 'What you need to know about sugar')
- Carry out preventative treatments such as fluoride varnish or fissure sealants, and polish teeth to remove any deposits or stains (only where needed)

3. How to prepare

First impressions are key. It's important to prepare your child for their first dental appointment. Depending on age, you can explain the surroundings and sensations they'll experience and why. This helps make it a more positive experience.

Following their first appointment, children should then be taken to the dentist at regular intervals, based on your dentist's recommendation. Dental appointments can be built into family schedules without affecting work and school.

Our dental teams promote a convenient, preventative approach to oral healthcare, encouraging and supporting patients at every life stage to avoid dental pain and to maintain lifelong oral health.

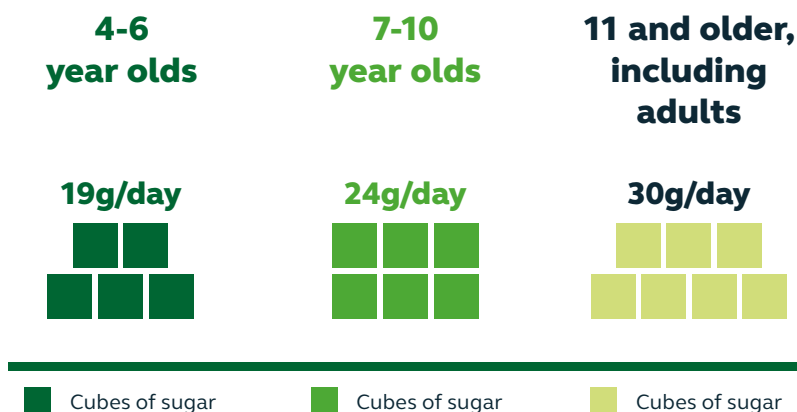
More than half of respondents or their dependents needed emergency dental treatment in the last year, with a third taking time off work and a further 16% taking time off for a dependent to have treatment.

Brushing twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste is an essential factor in preventative care, yet 23% of our survey respondents said they only brushed once a day - a further 4% didn't brush every day. Almost a third of those who brush their teeth said they brushed for less than the recommended two minutes.

Among those who do not brush their teeth daily, young adults were the most likely to forget to brush their teeth, with over-55s most likely to say they couldn't be bothered or didn't think they need to.

It's possible that remote or home-working, far more common in recent years, has negatively impacted many of our self-care routines.

Good to know: Recommended daily limits



Dentistry, the early years:
A word from our clinical expert



Louis Mackenzie,
Head Dental Officer
at Denplan

“Your dentist will need you present during a child's examination. It can also be helpful to take younger children along to older relatives' dental appointments. This helps children to feel more relaxed in the environment and around the practice team.”

‘Dentaphobia’ in context

“ Though a commonly recognised fear, this colloquialism doesn’t appear in any official dictionaries and refers to an extreme form of dental anxiety. As highlighted by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, sufferers will go to great lengths to avoid visiting the dentist due to this perceived danger.⁴ ”

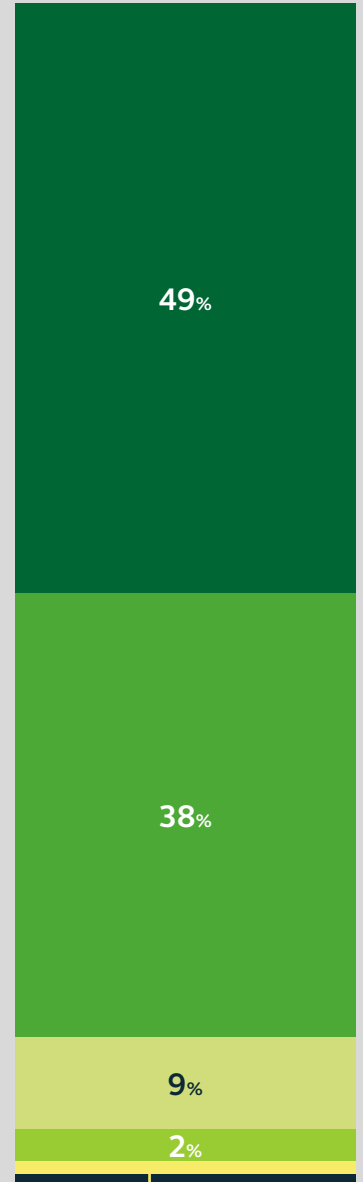
Many dentists are now trained in managing patients’ anxiety and can help them to overcome the extreme fear that would at one time have prevented them from ever setting foot in a dental practice.

From our survey, although fear of the dentist is now less of a barrier to regular preventative care than cost, 26% of respondents who don’t go for regular check-ups said they are afraid of the dentist, and a further 17% said they worry that they might find things that need further treatment.

This concern about potential pain or affordability of treatment is likely preventing patients from receiving early diagnosis and could lead to more serious issues down the line.



Almost nine in 10 (87%) agree that good oral health habits should be taught in childhood to improve oral health for life:



- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree strongly
- Don't know



Good oral health habits, starting in childhood, improve oral health and can help to reduce ‘dentaphobia’ anxiety

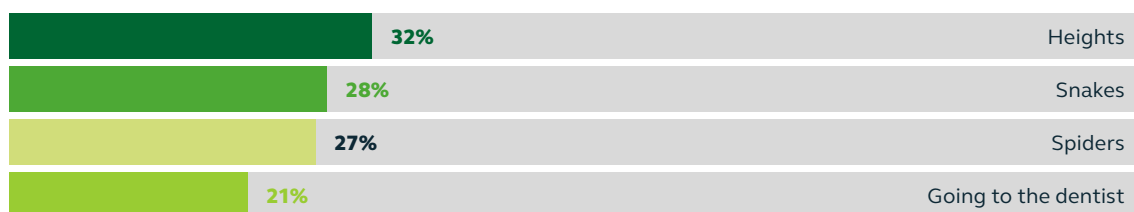
Going to the dentist was ranked fourth, behind heights, spiders and snakes in terms of our respondents' phobias, though over a third admitted to being scared of the dentist in general.

It's telling that so many (66%) said they feel comfortable with their own dentist because they see the same one consistently and that 54% would prefer to wait to see their own rather than see one they don't know.

Trust is particularly important for those who are anxious about visiting the dentist and with over half of respondents saying they or their dependents needed emergency treatment in the last 12 months. Many will have needed care in unfamiliar surroundings, such as at A&E, a dental emergency hub, or with another dentist. Being able to schedule regular preventative check-ups with the same dentist is the best way to minimise anxiety as well as reducing the need for treatment.



Visiting the dentist is ranked fourth out of the phobias listed, with more than a fifth (21%) of participants saying they are scared of the dentist. Only heights, spiders and snakes top this fear:



Conclusion

Denplan's 2023 Oral Healthcare Report brings to light a spectrum of challenges that are currently impacting dental health in the United Kingdom.

Our findings highlight the pressing need for accessibility to dental services, the availability of affordable dental care options, and a shift towards preventative care spanning all age groups.

The ongoing cost of living crisis in the UK has left its mark on individuals and families alike. With everyday expenses such as housing, energy and food on the rise, there isn't the disposable income for all to take a preventative approach to their oral healthcare, leaving many exposed to large unexpected costs when problems arise.

The significance of implementing good oral health habits from an early age cannot be ignored. Demonstrating preventative behaviours, such as brushing twice a day and attending regular dentist visits can have a huge impact on maintaining oral health and reducing any anxiety surrounding the dentist.

There is a clear role for employers to play in supporting their workforce with access to dental services. Of those who visited the dentist at least every two years and have this cost covered by a cash or insurance plan, just over a quarter (27%) received cover through an employer. Oral health is an essential part of someone's overall health and helping employees access services they are struggling to reach, such as dentistry, will support a healthier and happier workforce. With 23 million work days lost to dental pain over 12 months, access to these services can have a big impact on overall productivity.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the current challenges facing dentistry, the report highlights solutions to ease some of the pressure, including:

- Driving awareness of the simple preventative things people can do at home to limit the chance of dental problems occurring
- Empowering employers to provide dental plans to support employees with the cost of dental services
- Providing affordable solutions to help patients spread the cost of dental treatment and help to avoid unexpected costs for more serious interventions

At Denplan, we remain committed to championing the needs of dental practices and patients to ensure a preventative approach to oral healthcare in the UK.

References

1. Source: Highest absenteeism in a decade – CIPD report 2023 Workplace absences soar to highest level in over a decade, finds new report | CIPD Workplace absences soar to highest level in over a decade, finds new report | CIPD
2. Source: 23 million sick days due to dental pain – Oral health survey press release denplan.co.uk/content/dam/denplan/pdfs/press-releases/simplyhealth-oral-health-survey-press-release.pdf
3. Source: Tooth extractions in 0-19 year-olds <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hospital-tooth-extractions-in-0-to-19-year-olds-2022/hospital-tooth-extractions-in-0-to-19-year-olds-2022>
4. Source: Fear of dentists and needles needs sympathetic ear - BBC News
5. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/242701/media-nations-report-2022.pdf
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-profile-for-england/chapter-5-inequality-in-health>

About the 2023 Denplan Oral Health Survey

Between 30 June and 10 July 2023, Deltapoll surveyed a representative sample of 5,101 adults in Great Britain.

Calculating working age Brits

- According to the 2021 Census, 62.9% (37.5 million) of the population in England and Wales were of working age (aged 16-64).
- According to the Scottish Government, the latest population figures published by the Office of National Statistics Estimates there were 3.48 million people aged 16 to 64 in Scotland as of mid-2020.
- According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, in 2021, 849,000 people over the age of 16 were in employment.
- These figures combined produce a figure of 41,829,000 people of working age in the four nations of the United Kingdom.

References for extrapolated figures

1. 2021 Oral Healthcare Report .
2. 21% of people have taken less than a week off work, 7% have taken more than a week off work - 28% in total. 28% of 41.83 million is 11.71 million.
3. That means of those that have taken time off work, 75% have taken at least 1 day (21 in 28) and 25% have taken 5 days or more (7 in 28). 75% of 11.71 million have taken at least 1 day off work due to dental pain, equivalent to at least 8,784,090 days, 25% of 11.71 million have taken at least 5 days off work due to dental pain, equivalent to at least 14,640,150 days. Combined the figure is at least 23,424,240 days, but will likely be higher as the figures account for the minimum that can be calculated from the data (it assumes under a week equals 1 day, even though a respondent may have in fact taken 2, 3 or 4 days).
4. There are 252 actual working days in a year (260 minus eight bank holidays). 23,424,240 days, is the equivalent of 92,953 work years – or full time jobs.