

No access to dental care: Facts and figures on visits to emergency rooms and physicians for dental problems in Ontario

- About 1 in every 5 people in Canada avoids visiting a dentist because they cannot afford the cost, according to a 2014 report by the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.
- In Ontario, the College of Dental Hygienists estimates that between two and three million people have not seen a dentist in the past year, mainly due to the cost.

Every 9 minutes someone goes to an ER in Ontario because of dental pain

- Across the province in 2015 there were almost 61,000 visits to hospital Emergency Rooms (ER) for oral health problems.*
- The most common complaints were abscesses and dental pain.
- This is evidence that many people are using costly acute care ER for dental problems because they cannot afford dental treatment.
- However, at the ER, people can only get painkillers, not treatment to solve the problem. So many will return to ER.
- Our research found that more people visit the ER for dental problems than for diabetes problems.

This is a costly and inappropriate use of hospitals' Emergency Medicine resources

- At a minimum of \$513 per visit, the estimated cost for dental complaint visits to ERs in Ontario was at least \$31 million in 2015.
- Everyone in Ontario should be able to receive affordable preventative dental care in their communities. But OHIP does not cover our teeth and gums.
- The high cost of private dentistry, the limitations of employer dental benefits and the lack of public oral health programs mean that many people do not visit a dentist or dental hygienist.

Every 3 minutes someone goes to a doctor's office in Ontario because of dental problems

- People are also visiting physicians' offices for dental problems. In 2014, there were almost 222,000 visits for dental complaints.
- But physicians are not trained to deal with diseases affecting teeth and gums so they cannot provide treatment.
- At a minimum cost to OHIP of \$33.70 per visit, the total estimated annual cost to the system was at least \$7.5million, with no effective treatment provided.

Need to expand public dental programs for people living on low incomes

- The Ministry of Health & Long Term Care is working to transform Ontario's healthcare system to ensure people can get the right care, at the right time, in the right place. They've committed themselves to a sustainable system that delivers better value for public investment.
- Yet lack of access to affordable oral health care is costing taxpayers at least \$38 million per year -- without offering effective treatment for people's dental problems.

- Dental visits to ER and doctors' offices are avoidable. **We need government investment in public dental programs that provide preventative care and treatment for low income adults and seniors.**
- Research shows that people living on low incomes prefer to be treated in public dental clinics where they are welcomed and valued, and that many private dentists are frustrated because low income people cannot pay and often miss appointments.
- If people living on low incomes could get their oral health needs met at public clinics and Community Health Centres, they would not be clogging up their local ER or visiting their physicians.
- The Ontario government should redirect the \$38 million (minimum estimate) spent on acute care for oral health in ERs and physician offices, and add to these funds to ensure a properly funded public program that would provide oral health care for low income adults and seniors.
- The Ontario Oral Health Alliance calls on the Ontario government to extend existing public oral health programs for low income children so that they can reach low income adults and seniors. The program should be delivered in a cost efficient way by organizations that already serve many vulnerable people in their communities: public health units, Community Health Centres and Aboriginal Health Access Centres.

Number of Patient Visits for Oral Health Problems to ER and Physician offices in Ontario*		
Local Health Integration Network	Visits to ER (2015)	Visits to Physicians (2014)
CENTRAL	4,007	27,696
CENTRAL EAST	5,755	25,745
CENTRAL WEST	1,713	18,916
CHAMPLAIN	6,149	17,888
ERIE ST. CLAIR	2,866	11,070
HAMILTON NIAGARA HALDIMAND BRANT	6,430	23,018
MISSISSAUGA HALTON	2,629	19,041
NORTH SIMCOE MUSKOKA	3,650	7,689
NORTH-EAST	6,453	10,936
NORTH-WEST	2,558	4,267
SOUTH EAST	3,779	8,902
SOUTH WEST	7,342	18,747
TORONTO CENTRAL	5,003	17,400
WATERLOO WELLINGTON	2,445	9,527
Unknown		934
Total	60,779	221,866



*Reasons for visits: disease of oral cavity, salivary glands and jaws. Most common complaint: abscess, toothache.

Source of data: Ministry of Health & Long Term Care IntelliHEALTH ONTARIO

Costing:

ER: According to St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto, the average cost for a visit to their Emergency Room to see a physician about a dental emergency is at least \$513. This does not include the cost for those people who will require hospitalization.

Using this figure, OOHA estimates the total cost of visits to Ontario hospital Emergency Rooms for oral health problems was at least \$31 million in 2015.

Doctors’ offices: The minimum cost of a 15-minute visit to a physician is \$33.70. Using this figure OOHA estimates the total cost of visits to physicians’ offices in Ontario for 2014 for dental complaints (latest available data) was at least \$7.5 million.

Note prepared by: Jacquie Maund
Association of Ontario Health Centres, January 2017
jacquie@aohc.org