

Poor dental health increases risks of frailty in older men

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Oral health issues are common among older adults. These issues include tooth loss, gum disease, tooth decay, and dry mouth. These conditions can also affect an older adult's well-being because they may make it harder to eat, swallow, speak, get adequate nutrition, and even smile.

Oral health issues like [tooth loss](#) and [gum disease](#) are also linked to increased risks of frailty. Frailty is the medical term for becoming more vulnerable to declining health or the inability to perform the activities of daily living. Frailty is a major healthcare challenge for [older adults](#) and caregivers. Someone who is frail can be weak, have less endurance, and be less able to function well. Frailty increases the risk for falls, disability, and even death.

Over a three-year period, researchers from the United Kingdom examined the relationship between poor [oral health](#) and older adults' risks for becoming frail. They published their findings in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers studied information from the British Regional Heart Study. This study included 7,735 British men. They were first examined in 1978 to 1980 when they were 40- to 59-years-old. In 2010 to 2012, researchers invited 1,722 surviving [participants](#) to be re-examined. During that time period, the participants were 71- to 92-years-old.

Participants were given physical exams, which included height, weight, and waist measurements. They also took timed walking tests and had their grip strength measured. They answered questions about their medical history and lifestyle. They also answered a questionnaire asking about medical, social, and health-related information.

The exam included a dental exam. Dental health professionals counted the participants' natural

teeth and measured the health of their gums. Participants answered questions about their dental health, including if they had dry mouth.

Researchers also noted the participants' frailty status. Participants were considered frail if they had at least three of these issues: exhaustion, weak [grip strength](#), slow walking speed, weight loss, or low levels of physical activity.

The researchers found out the following facts about the participants' dental issues:

- 20 percent had no teeth
- 64 percent had fewer than 21 teeth
- 54 percent had gum disease
- 29 percent had at least two symptoms of dry mouth
- 34 percent rated their oral health as "fair to poor"
- 11 percent said they had trouble eating

The researchers said that men with dental issues were more likely to be frail than men without those issues. These dental issues included having no teeth, having trouble eating, having dry mouth symptoms, or rating oral health as "fair to poor."

The researchers also noted that complete tooth loss, [dry mouth](#), and additional oral health concerns were especially linked to developing frailty.

The researchers concluded that these findings highlight the importance of oral health for older adults, suggesting that poor oral [health](#) contributes to frailty.

More information: Sheena E. Ramsay et al, Influence of Poor Oral Health on Physical Frailty: A Population-Based Cohort Study of Older British Men, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.15175](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.15175)

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