

Seniors visit dentist less, at risk of growing more frail, says study

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As they grow older, Singaporeans visit the dentist less often, get lonelier and face the risk of becoming more frail.

This was revealed in a recent nationwide longitudinal study that showed only around a quarter of the seniors had visited a dentist within the past six months, while nearly one-third had not seen a dentist in more than five years.

“It is possible that people only visit the dentist when they have a problem, but they may not consider prevention as something they could engage in, in the context of dental health,” said Associate Professor Rahul Malhotra.

The deputy director of the Centre for Ageing Research and Education at Duke-NUS Medical School is the first author of the latest tranche of the Transitions in Health, Employment, Social Engagement and Intergenerational Transfers in Singapore (The Signs) study.

With recent research and policy focus on oral health, and research studies highlighting its link to other health and social outcomes, a dental module was added to this study round, he said.

The introduction of new dental subsidies under the CHAS card presents a good opportunity to increase awareness among older adults about the importance of regular dental check-ups, he added.

A total of 1,535 seniors aged 67 to 101, of whom 64 were aged 90 and above, were surveyed. They are part of the original cohort recruited for study in 2016-2017.

The results were published on Dec 30, 2025. This round of the study – Wave 3a – was funded

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Ageing seniors often face increased loneliness

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by the Ageing Planning Office at the Ministry of Health.

Such studies offer insights that would help shape interventions aimed at helping Singapore's rapidly growing senior population maintain health and social connection to age well.

The Signs study observed that approximately half of the community-dwelling seniors exhibit frailty, ranging from mild to severe, with two-thirds found to have only very mild frailty.

This is based on a threshold proposed in the National Frailty Strategy Policy Report, as an alternative

classification commonly used internationally has a higher threshold for classifying frailty.

Prof Rahul said this group of pre-frail seniors should focus on muscle strengthening and maintaining a balanced diet to prevent getting weaker.

As seniors age, they also often experience increased loneliness, with nearly one in four reporting being mostly lonely.

The proportion of mostly lonely seniors was higher in those aged 80 and above, slightly higher in women, and higher for Malays and Indians, among the three major ethnicities.

Other areas of concern that the

study highlighted include low cancer-screening uptake, increased depressive symptoms, reduced social networks, lower digital inclusivity among the oldest-old, and lower feelings of trust and camaraderie within residential neighbourhoods.

These would require prompt action as the nation continues to age, the study authors said in their conclusion.

Furthermore, the oldest-old, aged 80 and older, which is the fastest-growing segment of the older adult population in Singapore, consistently reported poorer status across multiple physical, social and psychological health indicators.

So far, cancer-screening rates have remained below 50 per cent among seniors.

For instance, only one in three Singaporean women aged 67 to 69, and one in four aged 70 to 79, had undergone a mammogram to screen for breast cancer within the

past two years.

This is despite the recommendation for all women aged 50 or older to undergo screening for breast cancer through mammograms once every two years, unless advised otherwise by a medical professional.

When it comes to psychological health, clinically significant depressive symptoms were observed among 16.5 per cent of older Singaporeans. This proportion increased with age and was higher for women (20 per cent) and Indians (24.3 per cent), the study found.

It also found that some 39 per cent of seniors were at risk of social isolation, with the proportion higher for those aged 80 and above as well as for men.

When it came to vaccination uptake, it was observed that while some 91 per cent of older adults had taken three or more doses of Covid-19 vaccination, only about

60 per cent of them had taken the influenza vaccine in the past 12 months and about 53 per cent had ever taken the pneumococcal vaccine.

This is despite the increased efforts, such as public awareness campaigns and vaccine subsidies, to encourage the uptake of both vaccines among older adults, said Prof Rahul.

The study also found that just over half of the seniors felt that they had enough money to meet their needs, while 55.1 per cent of seniors received monetary support from family members or other people.

The receipt of support increased with age, and women were more likely than men to receive most types of support, except housework help.

Meanwhile, only 7.4 per cent of older Singaporeans were informal caregivers, with the proportion falling with age. It was higher for

women and Malays.

While some 47 per cent of them reported feeling moderately to extremely burdened by their caregiving role, a bigger proportion found positive aspects. Some 86 per cent of the seniors reported feeling more useful and nearly 86 per cent reported appreciating life more because of caregiving.

Meanwhile, data collection for Wave 3b of The Signs study has been completed, with the results expected to be out before the end of the year, said Prof Rahul.

Wave 3b involved interviewing a new sample of approximately 5,300 older Singapore residents, aged 60 and above.

Crucially, the researchers will be able to compare the new findings with previous research, allowing them to examine how the ageing process among older adults may be changing over generations.

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