



## Editorial

# Oral health and the next pandemic: A call to action

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The global COVID-19 pandemic has proven the point that we humans are not safe from communicable diseases and new variants emerge continuously. Newer, particularly virulent entities may require advanced or radically different treatment options as a solution. Hence, mankind is always required to keep looking for newer threats and also solutions for potential threats. The pandemic also exposed the interconnectedness of global health threats. As a lesson from COVID-19, it is imperative to anticipate future challenges, including the potential for another pandemic. While the specific nature of the next pandemic remains uncertain, its impact on oral health and the role of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in exacerbating its effects cannot be ignored.

Oral health plays a crucial role in overall health and well-being. During pandemics, especially one that spreads through oro-respiratory routes, individuals with compromised oral health may be more susceptible to infections due to pre-existing weakened immune systems.<sup>[1]</sup> In addition, diseased oral health conditions can create entry points for pathogens, facilitating their spread. For instance, periodontal disease, characterized by inflammation of the gums and surrounding tissues, has been linked to increased systemic infection risk, including respiratory ones.<sup>[2]</sup>

NCDs, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity, are on the rise globally. These conditions often have comorbid oral health issues, such as dental caries, periodontal disease, and oral cancer.<sup>[3]</sup> During a pandemic, individuals with NCDs may be at a higher risk of severe illness or mortality, particularly if their oral health is compromised.

To enhance pandemic preparedness and resilience, it is essential to prioritize oral health promotion.<sup>[4]</sup> Some key strategies are outlined here. The primary step is that oral health should be considered an integral component of primary care. The second step is to work and understand how factors such as poverty, education, and access to healthcare significantly influence oral health outcomes. Policymakers must address social determinants of health to create equitable access to oral care. The third and most important factor is more focused investment. Continued research is vital to understand the complex interplay between oral health, NCDs, and infectious diseases. For all this to happen, there is a need for a robust public health infrastructure, which is essential for pandemic preparedness and response. This includes a well-trained dental workforce, surveillance systems, and emergency response plans.

The next pandemic could pose significant challenges to global health. By prioritizing oral health promotion and addressing the interconnectedness of oral health, NCDs, and infectious diseases, we can enhance our resilience and mitigate the potential impact of future pandemics. It is time for policymakers, healthcare providers, and communities to work together to ensure that oral health is a central pillar of pandemic preparedness and response.

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