



International Journal of Applied Dental Sciences

ISSN Print: 2394-7489
ISSN Online: 2394-7497
IJADS 2025; 11(3): 115-119
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www.oraljournal.com
Received: 22-06-2025
Accepted: 24-07-2025

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Exploring public perceptions of delayed dental care: A cross-sectional study

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/oral.2025.v11.i3b.2198>

Abstract

Aim: To assess the attributes and perception of general public who are delaying their dental treatment – A cross sectional questionnaire study.

Materials and methods: This hospital-based cross-sectional study was done among patients visiting Sri Venkateshwaraa Dental College over a period of 5 months. The study sample consisted of 393 outpatients. The eligibility criteria where any patient above 18 years were included. Survey was conducted via distribution of structured custom-made questionnaire. The data of responses of participants were collected and statistical analyses was performed using chi square test.

Results: The analysis and comparison of various reasons for delaying dental treatment among the study population (n=393), about 55.08% of participants approached or visited the dentist only after the onset of dental pain followed by 23.92% visited upon noticing decay, in which females comprised majority. The reason among patients for delaying their dental treatment, the highest priority chosen as fear of pain during treatment at about 27.95% and 16.71% for fear of injection. 52.2% of participant responded pandemic situation prevented them from visiting a dentist and reasons that prevented them from visiting, about 79.2% participants had fear of contracting the disease.

Conclusion: Awareness and knowledge about oral health and dentistry among population has come too far from insignificant and ignorance. This humongous attention needs a little more supportive and attitude from both sides to increase the overall oral hygiene to the next standard.

Keywords: COVID-19, dental anxiety, oral health

Introduction

Oral health is not just about the disease in the mouth, it is the mirror of general health. Oral health denotes not merely the absence of disease but the general well-being of the person and aids in the performance of various functions like mastication, speech, articulation & esthetics [1]. The dimension of oral health has been expanded by adding the concept of well-being after WHO broadened the definition of health by the inclusion of social well-being. Since then, it has been understood that oral health is integral to general health and well-being [2]. Dentistry is an honorable profession, but anxiety has risen towards dentistry. Often this branch of medicine is underestimated either due to socioeconomic reasons or due to fear. Maintenance of meticulous oral health practices is paramount for every individual [3]. The general population does not have a clear-cut view about the availability of various oral health care services. This leads to unreasonable anxiety, fear, and feelings of procrastination of dental treatment. Dental anxiety of patients is a common feature of the everyday experience of dental practice [4-6]. Various factors influences the decision of general citizen towards oral health and dental treatment and even the pandemic situation (Covid-19) worsened the situation more and makes it the darkest hour for dental services [7]. This survey is based on the aim of identifying the cause or the reason why among general public procrastinates the dental treatment.

Materials and Methods

Study setting and design

The present cross-sectional questionnaire study was conducted in 2022 among dental patients visiting private dental college in Puducherry, UT, India. The study was started after obtaining

approval from the Institutional Ethical Committee (48/SVMCH/IEC-Cert/Aug22).

Study participants

The study sample of 393 outpatients visiting Sri Venkateshwaraa Dental College were included in the study. Patient aged 18 and above, willing to participate in the survey were included in the study. The nature of the study was explained to the subjects before they provided their consent. Anonymity and confidentiality of their responses were assured.

Survey instrument

A 7-item closed-ended self-administered questionnaire was used in the present study. The survey was carried out by the distribution of a structured custom-made questionnaire composed of seven questions designed to assess the attributes and perceptions of public who are delaying their dental treatment. The questionnaire was translated into regional language/vernacular for ease of communication and understanding the purposes without a decline in the quality of the study. The questionnaire been created as hard copies and circulated to various participants with their consent in person.

Statistical Analysis

The data of responses of participants were collected and subjected to statistical analysis. Data were tabulated and analyzed. The data were then entered into Excel spreadsheets (MS Office 2013, Microsoft Corp. USA) and were analysed using SPSS for windows (SPSS version 17, Chicago, IL, USA). Chi-square test was used for frequency analysis.

Results

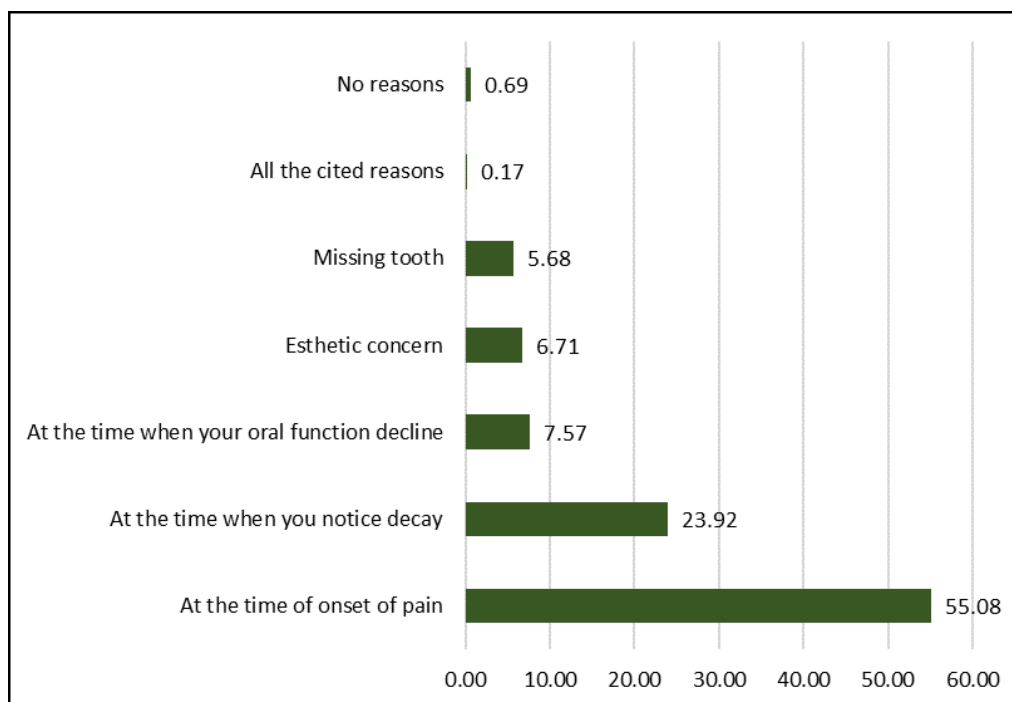
It was observed as the study predominantly comprised of male patients (56.7%); rest were females. The analysis and comparison of various reasons for delaying dental treatment among the study population (n=393) (Table 1), about 55.08% of participants approached or visited the dentist only after the onset of dental pain followed by 23.92% by noticing dental

decay in which females comprised majority (Graph 1). The analysis of study responses on reasons among patients for delaying their dental treatment, the highest priority chosen was fear of pain during treatment at about 27.95% which is cumulative with the response on fear of injection at 16.71%, in addition, multiple visits to the dental clinic was cited by 20.71% of participants, as it exhibits the uneasiness & pain during repeated procedure discouraging them from availing timely treatment (Graph 2). On analysis of direct statement questions to participants about their general knowledge of oral hygiene routine on availing dental treatment, it was found that 37.4% of respondents thought of visiting a dentist once in a year and 37.2% of respondents were not sure of when to visit a dentist. Only 15.1% of participants thought that dentist should be visited once in 6 months (Graph 5). It was found that 62.8% of participants were aware that delay in dental treatment can result in the loss of one or more teeth & 66.8% of participants were aware that visiting a dentist regularly helps in identifying disease early & prevents complications (Graph 3). Nearly 52.2% of participants responded pandemic situation prevented them from visiting a dentist & 43.3% of respondents still went to the dentist. On further analysis of reasons that prevented them from visiting the dentist during pandemic, about 79.2% participants had fear of contracting the disease and 7% participants did not visit the dentist due to financial constraints during the pandemic (Graph 4).

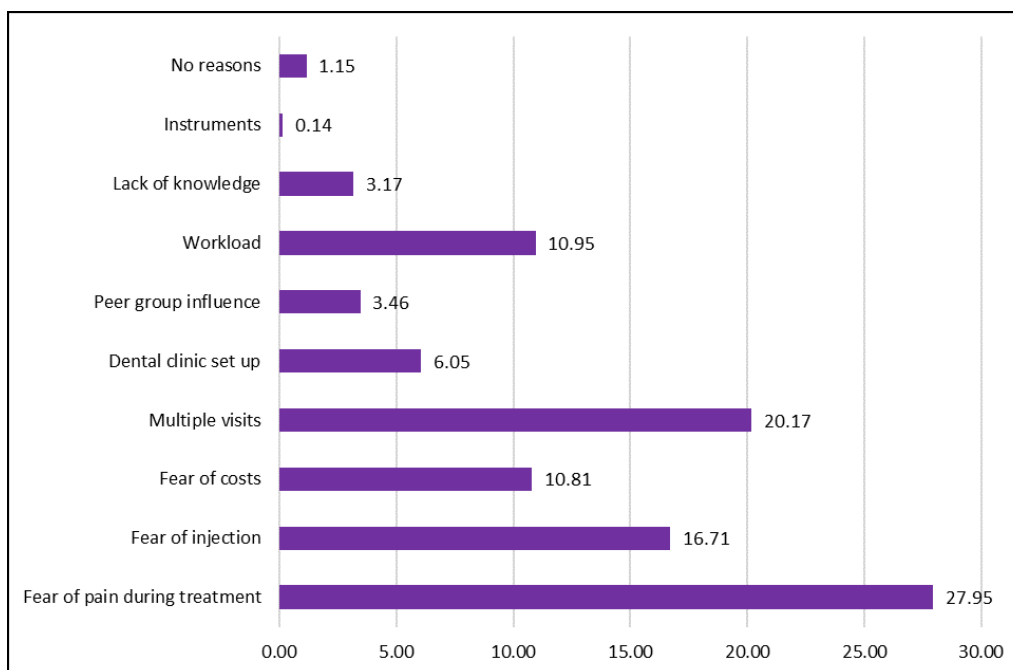
Table 1: Baseline characteristics of study participants (N = 358)

Age	Mean \pm SD	34.3 \pm 14.5
Gender	Males	203 (56.7)
	Females	155 (43.3)
Education	middle school or less	14 (3.9)
	High School	18 (5)
	Higher Secondary	37 (10.3)
	Graduate	195 (54.5)
	Post-graduate	36 (10.1)
	PhD	6 (1.7)
	No response	52 (14.5)

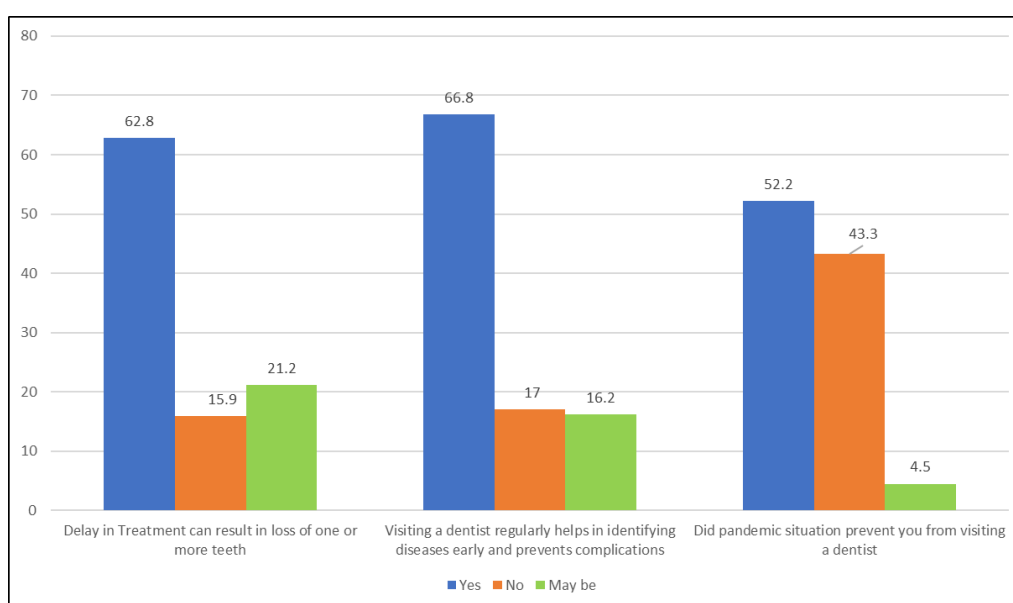
N (%); N-number; %-percentage



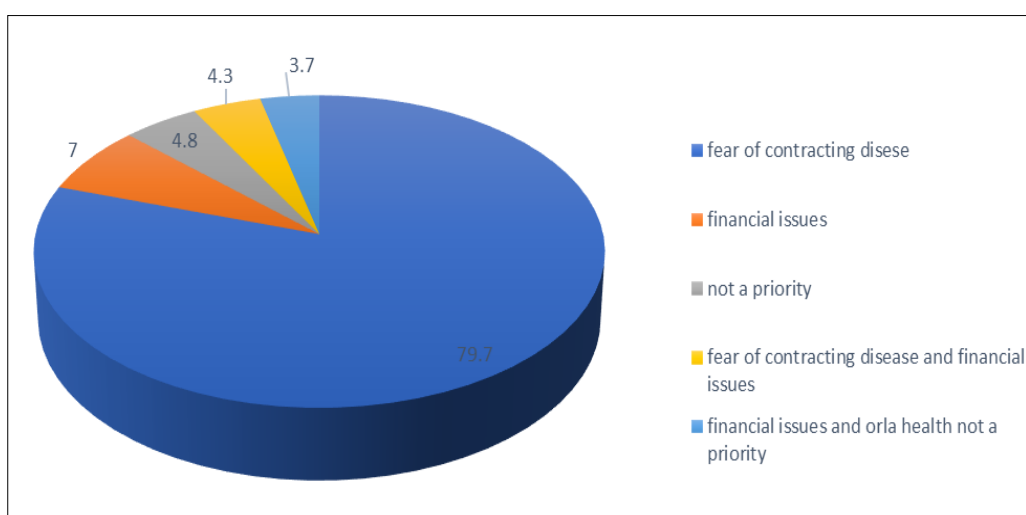
Graph 1: Study participant's response on reasons when they visit a dentist



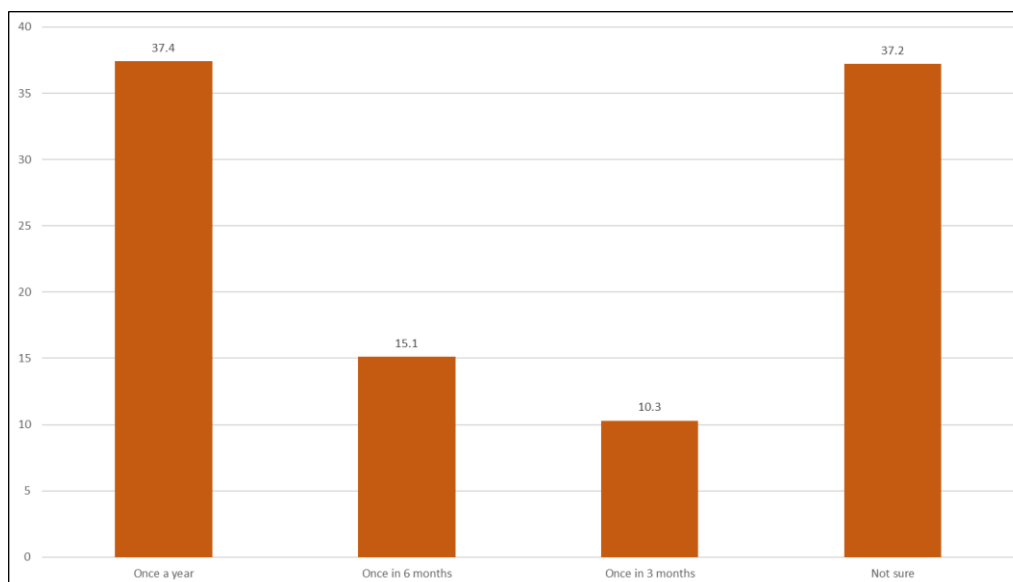
Graph 2: that delay their dental treatment



Graph 3: Study respondents' response towards various items in questionnaire



Graph 4: Reasons for not visiting a dentist during pandemic



Graph 5: Study respondents' responses to their perspective of routine dental visit (N = 358)

Discussion

The understanding of cause; It is of utmost importance for the dentist to explore or probe the reason that enables the patient to procrastinate from availing dental treatment is the major concern in all aspects^[8, 9]. The study intended to focus to know their point of perspective and their hindrance towards seeking dental treatment ultimately determines the lifelong health of the oral cavity. The General public consists of two groups that is the "Healthy" and "The treatment needy". Irrespective of their status most of them have a clue about maintaining their normal health but take no action towards it, as it disrupts their daily productive routine^[10]. The study showed irrespective of gender difference; the male counterpart showed more percent on availing treatment only after pain arises; which conveys that being in a major population in the working sector prevented them seeking dental treatment. Delaying their dental visit ultimately makes the treatment much more complex & invasive protocol as he visits the dentist in a later stage of disease. About 55.08% of participants visited the dentist only when pain arises and 23.9% visited the dentist only upon noticing the decay. 31.9% of patients said that their main reason to delay their dental treatment is fear of pain during treatment, which is followed by fear of injection 27.4%; it seems to convey that the concept of pain is still in play from our ancestral period in deciding the patient to get their proper treatment done. This subjective anxiety level, which is due to their lack of knowledge about oral health as a hidden factor to be the deciding factor to procrastinate treatment^[11]. Jeddy N *et al*^[12] reported the precise reasons for dental fear, pain was the main reason of anxiety in almost 79.7% of their patients which was also similar to results of our study where 31% patients revealed fear of pain is the main reason to delay their dental visit. A study by Fotadar S *et al*^[13], in their study found that among the various procedures, local anesthetic injection was the most common reason for anxiety which was also similar to the findings in the present study which was second main reason for anxiety for dental treatment.

The reasoning question about awareness of dental health; it was found that 66.8% were aware that visiting a dentist regularly helps to improve the quality of oral health this shows the positive progressing knowledge on knowing the maintenance phase of oral health. While 62.8% of participants know that not visiting a dentist can lead to the loss of one or

more teeth, this conveys the years of recent efforts to educate the children from school and public awareness programs from dental camps are taking root in the minds of the public. More encouragement and awareness are needed to educate the public about the importance of oral health and to conduct camps to reach the low economic sector community^[14-16].

Upon evaluating their perspective on a routine dental visit, 37.4% visit the dentist once a year, while 37.2% of participants not sure about visiting a dentist periodically, this clearly shows that majority of population does not have an idea about visiting a dentist in regular basis which would help them to maintain a good oral health. The study also includes the impact of the pandemic influencing their dental treatment. It was found majority, 79.7% of participants delayed their treatment because of fear of contracting disease which is recorded as the darkest era for the dental profession. A study by Yuan S *et al*^[17] concluded that both dental as well as general anxiety among dental patients during the pandemic time was fear of contracting covid-19 infection when using dental facilities similar to the findings in the present study. Research by Gowdar IM *et al*^[18], in their study concluded that the fear of dental treatment during pandemic was moderate among dental patients.

The various aspect of the questionnaire conveys that pain is the biggest factor for availing the dental treatment despite their various responses on the reason for delaying dental treatment as well as it's a double edge sword because of the general lack of identifying disease in the early stage where it incipient is overlooked which later complicate the patient treatment that ultimately may even lead to loss of overall health status of the individual.

Conclusion

We live in an era of modern dentistry; it is evident that the up-rise in awareness & knowledge about oral health in society is acknowledgeable. The findings from our study showed that the majority of participants show positive attitude in availing the dental treatment. But one factor remains the same in all times is pain and subjective fear about dental treatment; letting them procrastinate the treatment as much as possible with enabling them to make acceptable excuses like daily work schedule, financial constraint, responsibility to take care of family. However, despite all these educational population increases, slight gradual up rise in dental routine checkup sees

an upswing. Much-needed effective methods like screening camps with spot treatment options, and simplified form of effective communication with model demonstration will educate the public to change their way of thinking about oral health.

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How to Cite This Article

Paramasivam Y, Jayakumar S, Sridhar D, Arumugam K, Pulidindi H, Rajagopal R, *et al*. Exploring public perceptions of delayed dental care: A cross-sectional study. *International Journal of Applied Dental Sciences*. 2025;11(3):115-119.

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