

## **Preventive measures help ensure Soldiers' dental readiness**

By Patricia Deal

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FORT HOOD, Texas—Maintaining a high state of dental readiness shouldn't be like pulling teeth, state the experts at the U.S. Army Dental Activity (DENTAC) at Fort Hood.

Soldiers' dental readiness directly affects their deployability status and is defined by four dental fitness classifications:

Class 1: Worldwide deployment with no further treatment required.

Class 2: Worldwide deployment with need for non-urgent routine treatment.

Class 3: Nondeployable without treatment for urgent conditions that likely will cause a dental emergency within 12 months.

Class 4: Nondeployable with no examination documented within the past 12 months.

"The goal, of course, is maintain the highest level of dental fitness possible. Naturally, Soldiers want to stay as Class 1 or 2, which really is not as hard to achieve as many think. A Class 4 rating simply means Soldiers need to get an exam, and many times those Soldiers are redesignated as Class 2, where they might just need a cleaning, or a may have a small cavity that needs to be monitored or filled," explained Lt. Col. Stephen Wolpert, the DENTAC preventive dentistry officer at the Billy Johnson Dental Clinic here. "Class 3 is given when the Soldier has more serious treatment needs such as having at least one or more sizeable cavities or potential issues with wisdom teeth. Basically, we're looking for anything that poses a risk to the patient that would cause him or her to be non-mission-ready downrange. The goal is to take care of all that before the Soldier deploys."

With better access to care, active duty Soldiers typically have better dental health than their civilian counterparts. But it can still be better, according to Wolpert. Unfortunately, Soldiers usually have the same negative attitude toward dentists that the general population does.

"Just because they have free access, that doesn't mean going to a dentist is a priority for many," Wolpert said. "While they are the bravest men and women around, some Soldiers still are afraid of the dentist. Many will hold out until the pain becomes unbearable before they will see a dentist."

But it doesn't have to get to that point, according to Wolpert. Soldiers can take control of their dental health if they practice preventive oral hygiene.

"We want our Soldiers to be healthy, and one can't truly be healthy without good oral health. Health promotion and disease prevention are integral components of the Dental Command mission. Army medicine shifted its focus from a health care system that measures success by the numbers of patients treated and procedures performed, to a system of health care that prevents patients from needing treatment," said Col. Johnette Shelley, commander of Fort Hood DENTAC. "The more patients we can keep out of the dentist chair, the better it is for everyone." The Army has initiated a unique program that emphasizes preventive measures to improve Soldiers' overall oral health. The High Caries Risk Program targets Soldiers who have high levels of tooth decay and gives them nutritional counseling, oral hygiene instructions, intensive treatment to help prevent future decay and treatment for any cavities he or she has. This program also follows Soldiers as they move throughout duty stations in their Army career.

The intent behind the program is that Soldiers with low caries risk have fewer dental needs, better dental readiness and spend less time overall at dental appointments, which means more

time is available to their units.

"This is a great program for our Soldiers. Putting the emphasis on prevention will help break the 'decay-repair-decay' cycle," Wolpert said.

Wolpert and the other dental professionals promote proper dental hygiene through education and awareness during visits and also through a number of outreach community events. Lifelong habits they encourage everyone to maintain include:

- Brush with fluoride toothpaste and floss at least twice a day. Make sure you are brushing and flossing correctly—see your dentist for proper technique.
- If you can't brush, wipe plaque from your teeth with a cloth. Rinse or swish and swallow water after eating or drinking.
- Watch your diet and avoid sugary/starchy foods and drinks as much as possible.
- See your dentist for regular cleanings and checkups.

Wolpert added that there is a variety of dental hygiene products on the market, ranging from battery-operated toothbrushes to water piks that can help Soldiers maintain good dental hygiene. Any brand, any type will work—the key is to use them consistently, he said. Chewing gum with Xylitol three to five times a day is one easy means to help fight tooth decay.

Even while deployed, Soldiers need to continue good dental hygiene habits.

"We hear all the excuses such as 'There's no water' or 'I have no time.' Well, I've been deployed, and I'm here to tell you there is no valid excuse for not taking care of your teeth," said Capt. Jeremiah Hawkins, a dentist at Billy Johnson Clinic. "Seriously, just brushing and flossing regularly goes a long way to improve your quality of life."

Hawkins and Wolpert agreed that it is more difficult for Soldiers to maintain good dental hygiene when deployed. Soldiers seem to partake more in the habits that put them at risk for developing cavities such as smoking (or chewing) more and eating and drinking more sugary foods and drinks.

"No matter where you are, the cavity is still the most preventable disease out there," Wolpert stressed. "I always tell patients, ignore your teeth and they will go away. That extra time devoted to caring for your teeth can mean that you get to keep them for the rest of your life."

Pvt. Demarius Tolbert, from the 62<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Battalion here, knows the importance of good dental hygiene.

"I want braces so I'm working hard at taking care of my teeth. They gave me some good recommendations for things to help me like using fluoride-based toothpaste and mouth rinse," the 20-year old said. "My only issue is that I'm a smoker, and the dentist showed me how that hurts my teeth. I'm working on quitting now."

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CUTLINES:

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Capt. Jeremiah Hawkins, a dentist at the Billy Johnson Clinic at Fort Hood, discusses the condition of Pfc. Kendra Butcher's teeth as revealed by her panoramic X-ray and oral exam. Hawkins thoroughly educates all his patients about oral health and encourages them to be proactive in managing their dental readiness. (U.S. Army photo by Patricia Deal, CRDAMC Public Affairs)

**exam.jpg**

Capt. Jeremiah Hawkins, a dentist at the Billy Johnson Clinic at Fort Hood, examines Pfc. Kendra Butcher's teeth while dental technician Spc. Joané Cherry records his findings. Hawkins thoroughly educates all his patients about oral health and encourages them to be proactive in managing their dental readiness. (U.S. Army photo by Patricia Deal, CRDAMC Public Affairs)