

A report to congressional committees

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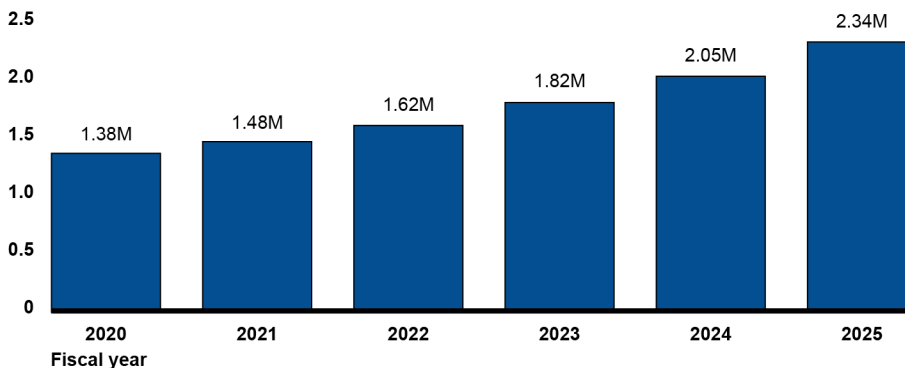
What GAO Found

More than 9 million enrolled veterans are eligible to receive health care services through the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) each year. Veterans who meet certain requirements (such as having a 100 percent service-connected disability or being former prisoners of war) are also eligible to receive VA dental benefits. According to VA, about 26 percent of VHA-enrolled veterans were eligible to receive dental benefits as of February 2026.

According to VHA data, the number of veterans eligible for VA dental benefits increased from fiscal years 2020 through 2025, resulting in an overall increase of approximately 70 percent from fiscal year 2020 through fiscal year 2025.

Number of VHA-Enrolled Veterans Eligible for VA Dental Benefits, Fiscal Years 2020–2025

Veterans (in millions)



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data. | GAO-26-108467

The increase in the number of veterans eligible for dental benefits was largely driven by increases in veterans eligible because of a 100 percent service-connected disability rating or a 100 percent service-connection compensation rate due to the inability to work, according to VHA data.

GAO's review of VHA data regarding demographic characteristics of veterans eligible for VA dental benefits (age, sex, race and ethnicity, and rurality of residence) from 2020 through 2025 found that the largest increase in veterans eligible for VA dental benefits occurred among younger veterans (under age 50). Specifically, younger veterans composed 21 percent of eligible veterans in 2020 compared to 36 percent in 2025. Other demographic characteristics of veterans remained relatively constant.

Using VHA data for 2025, GAO estimated that if all veterans with heart disease were eligible for dental benefits, the number of veterans eligible for VA dental benefits could increase by 25 percent from about 2.45 million to about 3.07 million. VHA officials and dental providers from selected facilities reported that if such an expansion were to occur, VA may need to consider hiring additional dental providers and increasing dental clinic space to accommodate it.

Why GAO Did This Study

According to VA, poor oral health can affect veterans' overall health. Additionally, the American Heart Association and others have reported a link between poor oral health and other serious health conditions, such as heart disease.

Congress has considered expanding eligibility for VA dental benefits to veterans with a diagnosis of heart disease. For example, the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act required VA to begin a pilot program in 2026 in which VA provides dental benefits to certain veterans with heart disease.

The act also includes a provision for GAO to examine VA dental services and benefits. This report describes (1) the population of veterans eligible for VA dental benefits and (2) the potential effect of including all veterans with heart disease in the population eligible for VA dental benefits.

GAO interviewed VHA officials and reviewed VHA documentation and data for calendar and fiscal years 2020 through 2025, the most recent full years of data available. GAO interviewed dental providers and staff from three VHA facilities, selected because they participated in a pilot program through which veterans without VA dental benefits could receive free or reduced-cost dental care. GAO also collected information from VA lead dentists and interviewed representatives from four relevant national organizations and three veterans service organizations, selected because they represent dental providers or could provide information about veterans' dental care experiences.