MODIFYING THE FREQUENCY OF DENTAL RADIOGRAPHICS

In 2004, the guidelines for routine dental radiographs were revised by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration and the American Dental Association. These groups recommended that patients at a low risk of dentistry's chronic diseases, cavities and periodontal diseases, receive less frequent exposures to dental x-rays. Delta Dental, using this recent FDA report, other reviewed scientific literature and its own claims data, recommends that the benefits for x-rays be altered to reflect these new and compelling data. This recommended change is both health conscious (lower routine exposure to ionizing radiation while preserving diagnostic needs) and cost conscious.

Dental radiographs are valuable diagnostic aids in specific situations. This diagnostic benefit is constantly balanced against the risks associated with added exposure to x-ray radiation. Radiographs should be taken only when the diagnostic yield is expected to affect the patient’s care. The more frequent use of x-rays in those at low risk for disease is discouraged.

The guidelines outlined in the FDA report reflect the decreased speed of progression of dental diseases, the decreased incidence of these diseases in U.S. populations and the increased diagnostic quality of modern radiographs.

Delta Dental recommends modifying the recall radiographic benefits so those beneficiaries who are 15 years of age and older and at low risk of disease are eligible for bitewing radiographs (vertical or horizontal) every 24 months and for a full-mouth series of radiographs every 60 months (five years). Children less than 15 years old with low risk should have annual bitewings as an available benefit. Panoramic radiographs should be routinely limited to once in every five year period.

Exceptions to this lowered frequency of radiographs will be granted on a risk basis, taking into consideration a patient’s history of progressive periodontal diseases, active formation and progression of cavities, growth abnormalities, unusual eruption sequences or spacing, etc. Orthodontic radiographs fall outside this limitation. An initial examination of a patient by a dentist/dental office, where previous x-rays are not available to the new dentist, still engenders a benefit if the dentist’s clinical examination demonstrates a need.

Modernizing dental benefits to reflect the disease patterns of today is one of the ways Delta Dental helps employers manage the health of their employees and their employees’ families. Appropriately limiting the recall radiographic benefit to lower radiation exposure while still providing the necessary adjunctive diagnostic services, is one way of meeting the community’s changing health care needs.

---

1 The selection of patients for dental radiographic examinations – FDA – ADA – 2004