



Oral Health for Seniors

How can I take care of my teeth?

Proper oral care can keep you smiling well into retirement. Brushing at least twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristle brush are as important as anything else you do to take care of yourself. Flossing is the only way to remove plaque between teeth and below the gum line that your toothbrush cannot reach. There are no other ways to prevent tooth decay and periodontal disease. This does not cost anything, but has a huge payoff for your health.

What are some problems I should watch for?

Gingivitis. Most people do not realize how important it is to take care of their gums. Gingivitis is caused by the bacteria that is found in plaque that attacks the gums. Symptoms include red, swollen gums and possible bleeding when you brush. If you have any of these symptoms, see a dentist at once. Gingivitis can lead to gum (periodontal) disease if problems persist. Three out of four adults over 35 are affected by some sort of periodontal disease.

In *periodontal disease* the infection becomes severe. Your gums begin to recede and pull back from the teeth. In the worst cases, bacteria form pockets between the teeth and gums, weakening the bone. All this can lead to tooth loss if untreated, especially in patients with osteoporosis.

If regular oral health care is too difficult, your dentist can provide alternatives to aid in flossing and prescribe medications to keep the infection from getting worse.

What if it is too difficult to brush?

If you have arthritis, you may find it difficult to brush and floss for good oral health and prevention of disease. Ask your dental hygienist for ways to overcome this problem. Certain dental products are designed to make dental care less painful for arthritis sufferers. You may want to strap your toothbrush to a larger object, such as a ball, to make the brush more comfortable to handle. Electric toothbrushes can help by doing some of the work for you.

Oral cancer usually occurs in people over the age of 45, but can develop at any age.

Signs of Oral Cancer:

- A sore on lip or in mouth that does not heal
- A lump on the lip, in mouth or throat
- White or red patch on gums, tongue or lining of mouth
- Unusual bleeding, pain or numbness in mouth
- A sore throat that does not go away or feeling that something is caught in the throat
- Difficulty or pain with chewing or swallowing
- Swelling of jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or be uncomfortable
- A change in the voice and/or pain in the ear.

It is important to see a dentist about any of these symptoms



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Oral Health for Seniors continued

Should I be concerned about dry mouth?

Dry mouth (xerostomia) happens when salivary glands fail to work due to disease. Certain medications or cancer treatment can result in dry mouth. Dry mouth can make it hard to eat, swallow, taste and speak. In certain cases, such as radiation therapy, dry mouth can lead to severe complications, which is why it is important that you see a dentist immediately before beginning any form of cancer treatment.

Drinking lots of water and avoiding sweets, tobacco, alcohol and caffeine are some ways to fight dry mouth. Your dentist can also prescribe medications to fight severe dry mouth. Dry mouth can also contribute to tooth decay because saliva provides a natural cleansing action in the mouth.

Maintaining overall health:

Studies have shown that maintaining a health mouth may keep your body healthier and help you avoid diabetes, heart disease and stroke. The best way to achieve good oral health is to visit your dental professional for a cleaning at least twice a year, plus twice daily brushing and regular flossing.

Tips:

- Snacking on celery, carrots or apples helps to clear away loose food and debris
- Toothbrushes should be replaced every 2-3 months or after illness or flu.
- Tobacco is the primary cause of oral cancers.
- Chewing gum can help eliminate food particles caught between teeth after a meal and also stimulates the saliva.
- Tooth decay is an infectious, transmissible disease.
- Sodium fluoride helps with sensitive teeth and slows the bone-thinning process of osteoporosis.
- Osteoporosis can be detected on dental x-rays.

This fact sheet was compiled for your from information supplied by the Academy of General Dentistry; the National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute; J. Butler GUM consumer education and ADHA Oral Health Fast Facts. This material is not intended to substitute for professional assessment of oral health concerns. See your dentist if you have any symptoms described above.

Gum Problems:

Almost all gum disease is caused by bacterial plaque.

This disease is progressive and often does not seem severe until teeth are ready to be lost.

Some of the signs of gum disease:

- Bad breath or a bad taste in your mouth
- Teeth that seem loose or have shifted position
- Gum tissue that is red, swollen or bleeds easily
- Pus between teeth and gums.

To determine if you have gum disease, it is best to see your dental professional and for them to assess your gums for the beginning signs of the disease.

***Brush and floss
your best defense
against gum disease!!***



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