

Oral Health Changes As We Age

Our mouth, teeth and gums may go through many changes as we age. Seniors face a range of special oral health concerns, including tooth decay and periodontal disease. People 55 to 74 years of age have higher rates of periodontal disease according to “Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General”(2000). Seniors also have an increasing amount of tooth decay compared to younger adults. These conditions may become more prevalent as people age.



Tell your dentist about any other health problems and medications you are taking to assure the most appropriate dental treatments.

The majority of people over age 50 have been affected by some form of gum (periodontal) disease and tooth decay. Oral cancer also is more common in older individuals. Practicing proven oral disease prevention by brushing with a fluoride toothpaste, flossing, drinking fluoridated water, having an orally healthy and nutritious diet, avoiding tobacco products and making regular dental visits are more important than ever.

Many changes in our mouth, teeth and gums are due to past or present oral disease and are not a natural result of aging.

- Gums may recede and bone supporting the teeth may be lost due to periodontal disease.
- Receding gums can expose tooth root surfaces making them more susceptible to tooth decay.
- Loss of bone due to periodontal disease may cause teeth to loosen.
- Oral cancer can occur more frequently in older individuals and can affect the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, tongue, hard and soft palates and floor of the mouth.

- Teeth may become more dry and brittle and may be more likely to crack or break.
- Years of chewing may wear down tooth enamel and teeth may become more sensitive.
- Mouth dryness may develop as a side effect of some medications increasing the risk of tooth decay.
- Old fillings may fracture.
- Bone shrinkage under dentures may occur.
- Teeth may appear to darken with age.

The aging process may lead to subtle, and sometimes dramatic, changes in the condition of teeth, mouth and gums. This makes regular dental visits crucial to our aging population. Brushing with fluoride toothpaste, flossing, orally healthy nutrition and regular dental visits can keep seniors smiling well into retirement.

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Knowing what to expect and how to deal with these changes can make all the difference in seniors' oral health and lifestyle. Seniors should follow the advice regarding their oral health care:

- Be aware that poor diet, poor oral hygiene, medical diseases, some medications and treatments, and ill-fitting dentures or bridges can increase the risk of tooth decay and periodontal disease.
- Fluoride is just as important in preventing cavities in adults as in children. Use fluoride toothpaste and drink plenty of fluoridated water.
- For dry mouth, your dentist might recommend sugar-free candy or gum to stimulate saliva flow. Artificial saliva or oral rinses may also be appropriate.
- Do not use tobacco products in any form.
- Tell your dentist about any other health problems and medications you are taking to assure the most appropriate dental treatments.
- Ask your dentist for tips if you have trouble holding a toothbrush or floss. Widening the handle of the toothbrush with a sponge or adhesive tape may help. Some like to use an electric toothbrush or commercial floss holder.

See your dentist at the first signs of trouble:

- Pain
- Tenderness or numbness
- Gums that bleed easily or are red or swollen
- A swelling, lump, thickening or rough spot
- Crust or small-eroded area anywhere in or about the mouth or neck
- White or red patches in the mouth or on the lips
- A sore that bleeds easily or does not heal
- A change in the way your teeth fit together
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw or tongue

For more oral health information, please visit our Web site at www.decare.com

Keeping your mouth healthy and your natural teeth for a lifetime is a wise choice you can make by employing proven oral disease prevention practices and visiting your dentist regularly.