

Oral Health Tips

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. Seniors also have an increasing amount of tooth decay compared to younger adults. These conditions may become more prevalent as people age.

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.

It is important to understand that many changes in our mouth, teeth and gums are due to past or present oral disease.

- Gums may recede and the bone supporting the teeth may be lost due to plaque and calculus build up causing 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 from long-time wear.
- Teeth may appear to darken with age.

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.

- 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, bone loss 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 artificial saliva, oral rinses, sugar-free candy (lemon drops) or gum to stimulate salivary flow.
- 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.

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- 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. In a few instances, an electric toothbrush or floss holder will be helpful.
- See your dentist regularly and 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.
- Keeping your mouth healthy for a lifetime is a wise choice you can make by using proven oral disease prevention practices and visiting your dentist regularly.

Source: American Dental Association www.ada.org