

# Senior Smiles

**No matter what your age, you need to take care of your teeth and mouth.** *When your mouth is healthy, you can easily eat the foods you need for good nutrition. Smiling, talking, and laughing with others also are easier when your mouth is healthy.*

Senior Smiles



A NATIONAL ORAL HEALTH AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

ALLIANCE of the AMERICAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION

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# Tooth decay

**Teeth are meant to last a lifetime.** By taking good care of your teeth and gums, you can help protect them for years to come. Tooth decay is not just a problem for children. It can happen as long as you have natural teeth in your mouth.

Tooth decay ruins the enamel that covers and protects your teeth. When you **DON'T** take good care of your mouth, bacteria can cling to your teeth and form a sticky, colorless film called dental **PLAQUE**. This plaque can lead to tooth decay.

Changes that occur in your mouth with aging may include receding gums and an increased risk of gum disease. Both of these can expose the roots of your teeth to plaque. Because the roots are softer than the enamel, they are more susceptible to decay and more sensitive to touch and to hot and cold.

## Old fillings

Decay around the edges or margins of fillings is also common with aging. Over the years, fillings may weaken, break, wear around the edges, or pull away from teeth. Bacteria can accumulate in the tiny crevices between the filling and tooth, which leads to decay. Old fillings may need to be replaced before decay has a chance to begin.

## Dentures

Dentures (or false teeth) may make your mouth less sensitive to hot foods and liquids, and may make it more difficult for you to chew hard foods.

Over time, your mouth may change. See your dentist 1-2 times a year to be sure these changes are not harmful or possibly even cancerous. In addition, your dentures need to be evaluated by your dentist to ensure that they fit well. Your dentist may recommend using a denture adhesive to help your dentures stay in place.

## Denture care

Dentures need to be cleaned daily to keep them free from plaque and food that can cause stains, bad breath, and swollen gums. Prior to going to sleep each evening you should:

- ▶ Remove your dentures.
- ▶ Using a denture brush and denture cleaner, gently brush all surfaces, then rinse using cold water.
- ▶ Soak them in a denture cleanser solution while you sleep.

In the morning, prior to inserting your dentures, brush your gums, tongue and palate with a soft-bristled toothbrush. This stimulates circulation in your tissues and helps remove plaque.

# Dry mouth

Dry mouth used to be thought of as a normal part of aging. **THIS IS NOT TRUE.** A healthy older adult should not have a dry mouth. Most often, dry mouth is caused by medications you are taking. If you think you have dry mouth, talk with your dentist or doctor to find out why. If your dry mouth is caused by a medicine you take, your doctor may change the medicine or the dosage to reduce the dry mouth effect.

Having a dry mouth can affect your oral and overall health. It can make it hard to eat, swallow, taste, and even speak. Dry mouth increases your risk of tooth decay and infection.

Possible ways to help manage the dryness:

- ▶ Sip water frequently.
- ▶ Cut back on sugary snacks.
- ▶ Cut back on caffeine and alcohol.
- ▶ Stop using tobacco products.
- ▶ Your dentist or doctor may recommend products such as mouthwashes, sprays, and artificial salivas.
- ▶ Suck on hard sugar-free candy.
- ▶ Chew sugar-free gum.

# Gum diseases

Gum diseases (also called **periodontal** or **gingival** diseases) are infections that harm the gum and bone that hold teeth in place. When plaque stays on your teeth too long, it forms a hard, harmful covering, called **calculus**. You will need to see your dentist and have your teeth cleaned. The longer plaque and calculus stay on your teeth, the more damage they cause.

If your gums become red, swollen, and bleed easily, you have **gingivitis**. If gingivitis is not treated, over time it can progress to **periodontitis**. If not treated, periodontitis can ruin the bones, gums, and tissues that support your teeth, and it can cause you to lose your teeth.

Here is how you can prevent gum disease:

- ▶ Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste.
- ▶ Floss once a day.
- ▶ Make regular visits to your dentist for a checkup and cleaning.
- ▶ Eat a well-balanced diet.
- ▶ Do not use tobacco products.

## Oral (mouth) cancer

Everyone is at risk for oral cancer, but it most often occurs in people over age 40. It is important to catch oral cancer early, because treatment works best before the disease has spread. Pain often is not an early symptom of the disease.

Having your mouth checked at least once a year allows your dentist to look for early signs of oral cancer. Even if you have lost all your teeth, you should still see your dentist for regular oral cancer exams.

It is very important to see your dentist or doctor if you have trouble with swelling, numbness, sores or lumps in your mouth, or if it becomes hard for you to chew, swallow, or move your jaw or tongue. These problems could be signs of oral cancer.

To lower your risk of getting oral cancer:

- ▶ Don't smoke.
- ▶ Don't use tobacco in any form.
- ▶ If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.
- ▶ Use lip balm that contains sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15.
- ▶ Eat a balanced diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables.



# Diabetes

Diabetes reduces your body's resistance to infection. Your gums are among the tissues most likely to be affected. Hence, periodontal disease is often linked to the control of diabetes. For example, people with poor blood sugar control seem to develop periodontal disease more often, more severely, and lose more teeth than those with good control.

Because of lowered resistance and a longer healing process, periodontal diseases often appear to be more frequent and more severe among persons with diabetes. That is why good maintenance of blood sugar levels, a well-balanced diet that meets your needs, good oral care at home, regular dental checkups, and periodontal examinations are important.

It is important to keep your medical health and medication history up to date. Let your dentist know:

- ▶ If you have been diagnosed with diabetes
- ▶ If the disease is under control
- ▶ If there have been any other changes in your medical history
- ▶ The names of all prescription and over-the-counter medications you are taking.

## Cleaning your teeth and gums

You want to be sure your teeth are clean every day. Knowing how to brush and floss the right way is a big part of good oral health. **Here's how:**

- ▶ Brush your teeth every day—preferably 2-3 times a day.
- ▶ Gently brush all sides of your teeth.
- ▶ Use a soft-bristle brush and a fluoride toothpaste.
- ▶ Brush your teeth using small round motions or short back-and-forth strokes.
- ▶ Be sure to brush gently along the gum line
- ▶ Lightly brushing your tongue also helps.
- ▶ Use dental floss or an interdental cleaner daily—this cleans between your teeth where the toothbrush cannot reach.
- ▶ Rinse after you have brushed and flossed or used an interdental cleaner.

If brushing or flossing makes your gums bleed, you may have disease or infection in your gums. See your dentist as soon as possible.

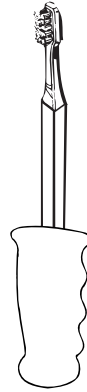
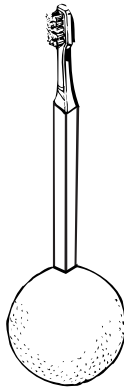
Your dentist may prescribe a bacteria-fighting mouth rinse to help control plaque and swollen gums.

## Problems holding a toothbrush?

Some people with arthritis or other conditions that limit motion may find it hard to hold a toothbrush or floss.

Here are some **toothbrush** suggestions to try:

- ▶ Use a powered toothbrush.
- ▶ Attach the toothbrush handle to your hand with a wide elastic band.
- ▶ Make the handle bigger by taping it to a sponge, rubber ball or bicycle handle. Also try winding adhesive tape around the handle.



Here are some **floss** suggestions you can try:

- ▶ Tie floss into a loop for easier handling.
- ▶ Use a commercial floss holder.

## Fluoride

Fluoride is as helpful for seniors as it is for children. Using a fluoride toothpaste can help protect your teeth. If you have a problem with cavities, your dentist or dental hygienist may recommend a fluoride treatment during the office visit, and a fluoride mouth rinse may be prescribed for you to use at home.

## Nutrition

Aging can affect your nutritional needs. Some changes that come with age are:

- ▶ Your body's ability to correct some nutritional imbalances declines.
- ▶ Increased use of multiple medications can change the way your body takes in and uses nutrients.
- ▶ Your sense of taste can weaken, causing loss of appetite.

Good nutrition is important to your overall health. To help maintain proper nutrition and keep teeth and gums healthy, you should continue to eat enough foods each day that contain **calcium, fiber, protein, and other essential vitamins and minerals.**

## Tips for healthy eating

- ▶ Eat a variety of foods and don't skip meals.
- ▶ Drink plenty of fluids.
- ▶ Eat a diet low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.
- ▶ Choose a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruits, and grain products.
- ▶ Use sugars, salt, and sodium in moderation.
- ▶ Drink alcohol in moderation.
- ▶ Limit diet soft drinks. Acid in these drinks can contribute to tooth decay and gum disease.
- ▶ Avoid snack foods.

## Staying active

With age, your energy level may go down, mostly as a result of declining physical activity. Stay active to:

- ▶ Increase your energy levels.
- ▶ Build and strengthen your muscles.
- ▶ Improve your balance.
- ▶ Keep your heart and blood vessels healthy.

Performing some daily physical activity, such as walking, may increase your appetite and may also help you sleep better.

# Taking supplements

At any age, the best way to get the nutrients you need is by eating a balanced diet. But, sometimes seniors cannot eat enough of the right foods. One way to improve your diet is by using liquid food (such as Boost,<sup>®</sup> Carnation<sup>®</sup> Instant Breakfast,<sup>®</sup> and Ensure,<sup>®</sup>) to provide extra calories, vitamins, and minerals. You can find these products in drug stores and large grocery stores. Check with your doctor to determine which product is best for you and whether or not you need it.

Your doctor may recommend a daily multivitamin or mineral supplement. Avoid taking herbal supplements unless you talk to your doctor first. Combining supplements with your diet could be dangerous to your health and make your medicines less effective.



## For more information

### **American Dental Association (ADA)**

211 East Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60611

(312) 440-2500

(800) 621-8099

<http://www.ada.org/>

### **Special Care Dentistry/American Society for Geriatric Dentistry**

401 North Michigan Avenue

Chicago, IL 60611

(312) 527-6764

<http://www.scdonline.org/>

### **National Institute of Dental & Craniofacial Research**

Building 45, Room 4AS19

45 Center Drive MSC 6400

Bethesda, MD 20892-6400

(301) 496-4261

<http://www.nidr.nih.gov/>

### **National Institute on Aging Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

(800) 222-2225

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/>



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