

Oral Health and Older Adults

What Is Oral Health?

Oral health is not only about keeping teeth clean. It refers to the jaws, lips, gums, teeth, tongue, and glands that make saliva. As you age, you become more prone to certain oral health problems. Oral health is important to discuss with both your dentist and primary health care professional (physician, nurse practitioner, physician assistant).

What Are Common Oral Health Problems for Older Adults?

- Gum disease (periodontitis) occurs when tartar builds up and contributes to infections deep in your gums. This can lead to loss of tissue, bone, and teeth. It can also increase your risk for other serious health problems, like diabetes, heart attack, or stroke.
- Tooth decay
- Mouth and throat cancers
- Dry mouth, which can be caused by medicines for high blood pressure, depression, or other health problems

What Are the Warning Signs of Oral Health Problems?

- Red, swollen, or tender gums or other pain in your mouth or teeth
- Bleeding while brushing, flossing, or eating
- Loose or separating teeth
- Dry mouth
- Sores in your mouth
- Lasting bad breath
- A change in the way your teeth or dentures fit together when you bite
- A lump or thickening inside the mouth
- A sore throat or a feeling that something is caught in the throat that doesn't go away
- Trouble chewing, swallowing, or moving certain parts of your mouth



How Are These Problems Treated?

- Gum disease can be treated by removing all plaque and tartar buildup from your teeth and gums through a deep cleaning. If gum disease is more serious, surgery may be needed.
- Certain medicines may be used, including prescription mouthwash, gel, or oral antibiotics for infections.
- Medicines that cause dry mouth may be changed. Special mouthwashes and sugarless candies or gum may also help with dry mouth.
- Oral and throat cancers may require different types of treatment, including surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy.



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How Can I Lower My Risk?

- Brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste twice a day.
- Floss daily.
- See your dentist regularly.
- Avoid tobacco, including chewing tobacco.
- Limit alcohol.
- Ask your primary health care professional about dry mouth as a side effect of any medicines you are taking.
- Discuss any medicines you are taking with both your dentist and primary health care professional.

How Can I Take Care of My Dentures?

On a daily basis:

- Before brushing your dentures, rinse with cool or warm water.
- Brush all surfaces of your dentures with a denture cleaning paste. You should only use a soft bristled toothbrush or a brush made just for dentures.

- Brush your cheeks, gums, the roof of your mouth, and your tongue.
- When you aren't wearing your dentures, put them in a safe place and cover them with water.
- Only use adhesives that your dentist recommends.

Questions for My Primary Health Care Professional

- Am I at risk for any oral health problems?
- How often should I go to the dentist?
- How can I avoid oral health problems in the future?
- What is the best way for me to take care of my teeth?
- How can I improve my dry mouth?
- Will you examine my mouth at my primary health visits?
- You're not a dentist—why is it important for you to examine my mouth?

For More Information

- **National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research:**
www.nidcr.nih.gov/OralHealth/OralHealthInformation/OlderAdults/
- **US Department of Health and Human Services:**
<http://healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/doctor-visits/regular-check-ups/oral-health-for-older-adults-quick-tips>

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