

# Methadone

Methadone is a synthetic opioid pain reliever similar to morphine. Although this medication is an opioid itself, it has been used to treat addictions to heroin and other narcotics since 1960. Heroin is highly addictive and withdrawal symptoms are more severe compared to other drugs. According to recent statistics, between 60,000 to 90,000 Canadians are addicted to illicit opiates like heroin. Many people have successfully overcome their addiction by using methadone during detoxification and maintenance programs. As health-care providers, dental hygienists have an important role in helping people on methadone improve their oral and overall health.

## ABOUT METHADONE

- Methadone is prescribed by a medical professional in solution form.
- The drug will not get people “high,” maybe lightheaded at the start of the treatment, and then they feel normal.
- If withdrawals persist, the methadone dose may have to be adjusted. For instance, a symptom of withdrawal is bone ache, indicating the dose may be too low.
- Long-term use of methadone is safe and does not damage internal organs.
- A sudden stop in usage can be dangerous. The safe way is for the dose to be gradually reduced and overseen by a medical professional.
- Methadone is not a cure for opioid addiction. It is a tool that helps repair the damage caused by dependence and build a new life. Methadone will make the job easier.

## THE IMPACT ON ORAL HEALTH

When people on methadone maintenance therapy (MMT) eventually go to a dental professional, they may require extensive oral care treatment and several appointments that over time will result in positive outcomes.

## RISK FACTORS

- Like many medications, methadone can cause dry mouth (xerostomia). A lack of saliva can make teeth more prone to the production of plaque, a major cause of gum (periodontal) disease and tooth decay.



- Methadone increases cravings for sugary carbonated beverages and food, which can also damage teeth and gums.
- Methadone has high acid content, causing erosion of tooth enamel.
- Opioids increase the risk of bruxism (tooth grinding), which may lead to tooth wear and jaw discomfort.

## THE ROLE OF THE DENTAL HYGIENIST

Prevention is extremely important for MMT clients. For those who are anxious about seeking dental treatment, dental hygienists are experienced in anxiety management, putting clients at ease and providing treatment in a nonjudgmental, supportive environment.

### **Dental hygienists will:**

- Review health history and medications.
- Develop a preventive treatment regimen.
- Customize home-care programs.
- Advise on nutrition and healthy eating as well as avoiding sugar in food and beverages.
- Educate MMT clients on reducing risk factors for enamel wear.
- Provide instruction on the most effective way to brush and clean between teeth.
- Clean (scale) teeth to remove bacterial plaque – a sticky white film that adheres to teeth, especially around the gum line. If left on the teeth it can cause oral disease.
- Apply topical fluoride or other agents to strengthen and desensitize teeth.

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- Support MMT client recovery by working closely with other health-care professionals such as physicians, dentists, dietitians, pharmacists and case managers.

## MAINTENANCE AND HOME CARE

Because MMT clients are on methadone for a long time to treat their addiction, the dental hygienist will be an ongoing, supportive partner, working together to prevent oral disease and maintain proper home care. This includes:

- Brush teeth a minimum of twice a day using a soft toothbrush, and floss or clean between teeth at least once a day.
- Rinse mouth with water after taking methadone and wait 30 minutes to brush teeth. This will allow acids to neutralize and help prevent enamel loss.



- Use a low-abrasive fluoridated toothpaste and alcohol-free mouthwash, when indicated.
- Stimulate saliva flow with sugar free gum/lozenges with xylitol, sip water during the day, suck on ice chips and use over-the-counter saliva substitutes. Raw carrots and celery help activate salivary glands.
- Eat a nutritious, well-balanced diet low in sugar and high in fibre.
- Avoid acidic food and beverages, e.g., carbonated drinks, caffeine, alcohol, sports drinks and grapefruit.
- Schedule regular dental hygiene appointments for professional cleanings.

**NOTE:** Additional fact sheets are available for information on xerostomia, dental caries and bruxism.

*As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated health-care professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.*

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