

# Oral Care for Seniors

Dentures do not have to be a fact of life. With proper oral hygiene, many seniors are keeping their natural teeth longer. A healthy mouth is important for maintaining quality of life, especially for the sick, the elderly and residents in long-term care homes. For those wearing full or partial dentures, it is still important to have a clean mouth and to get regular check-ups to prevent oral health problems.

## THE IMPACT ON ORAL HEALTH

Oral health is an important part of overall health. Most people don't connect their mouths to the rest of their bodies. There is growing evidence linking periodontal (gum) disease to a variety of serious health conditions including heart disease, stroke and respiratory disorders. Diabetes and oral health are also connected. Gum disease may worsen existing diabetes or increase complications associated with diabetes.

## CAUSES AND RISKS

### **Decay**

Two types of decay or cavities are prevalent in adults: root decay and decay at the edges of fillings. Cavities in older adults appear most frequently on the roots of the teeth at the gum line. Years of brushing too hard and the natural effects of aging can cause gums to recede, exposing the roots of the teeth, which are more susceptible to decay because they are not protected by enamel. Tooth or root decay is caused by bacteria (plaque), which should be removed thoroughly on a daily basis. Decreasing food and beverages high in sugar will also help to reduce cavities.

### **Periodontal (gum) disease**

Periodontal disease is one of the most common diseases in humans. Over time, a buildup of bacteria or plaque on the teeth can cause inflammation of the gums that can spread to the underlying bone and lead to tooth loss. Swollen bleeding gums, loose or shifted teeth, bad breath and gum recession are signs of periodontal disease. It is important to keep teeth and gums as plaque free as possible with professional cleanings and daily brushing and flossing.



### **Dry mouth**

Dry mouth occurs when there is a decrease in saliva flow. There are a number of causes including medications for high blood pressure, heart problems and depression; radiation therapy to the neck and head; Sjogren's syndrome; diabetes and dehydration to name a few. Dry mouth can lead to an increase in decay and periodontal disease. It can also affect chewing, speaking, swallowing and ability to taste. To help relieve dry mouth, sip water throughout the day, chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless mints, or use oral lubricants available over the counter. Regular professional cleanings, proper diet and a diligent homecare program are recommended to reduce the risk of cavities and gum disease.

## TREATMENT

Discuss changes in health and any oral care concerns with a dental hygienist, who will conduct a comprehensive oral evaluation and develop a customized preventive care program to help keep your mouth healthy. Keep track of medications and changes in diet that will help dental professionals assess conditions and determine appropriate treatment.

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## PREVENTION/MAINTENANCE

### Proper nutrition

At any age, proper nutrition is important for oral health and overall health. Eat a healthy diet following Canada's Food Guide.

### Daily hygiene

- **Brush** – natural teeth twice a day with a soft toothbrush and fluoridated toothpaste. Hold the toothbrush at a 45-degree angle to the teeth and clean using a small circular motion. Brush gently. Brush both the inside and outside of the top and bottom teeth as well as the chewing surfaces. Pay special attention to teeth that support a partial denture in order to remove accumulated debris. It is also important to brush the tongue, gums and roof of the mouth to tone gum tissue and remove bacteria. A power toothbrush has a wide handle and may be easier to grasp for a more thorough cleaning.
- **Floss** – or clean between teeth once a day. One-handed flossers are available for those who have difficulty with traditional flossing. A dental hygienist may recommend other products to clean larger spaces between the teeth or to massage gums, such as a rubber tip stimulator, wooden dental picks or small brushes (proxy or sulcus brush).
- **Rinse** – with fluoridated mouth rinse to decrease cavity susceptibility, if recommended by a dental hygienist.

### Dental hygiene visits

Increase dental hygiene visits and professional teeth cleaning.

### Denture care

- Dentures, full and partial, accumulate food and plaque and need to be cleaned.
- Dentures should be brushed thoroughly to loosen food debris and reduce odours.
- Commercial denture cleaning solutions do not replace the need to brush.
- Dentures should be brushed thoroughly twice a

day using warm water and mild soap or denture paste.

- Brush over a sink partially filled with water and lined with a washcloth to prevent breakage in the event the denture is accidentally dropped.
- Do not use toothpaste or cleansers that can scratch, and never use bleach to clean or soak dentures as it can discolour and weaken them.
- When not wearing dentures, or at night, soak them in water or a denture cleaning solution to prevent drying.
- After any soaking, rinse dentures in warm water.
- Denture cleansers may be toxic if ingested. They should not be gargled or swallowed.

Proper care of dentures can extend their life and contribute to a healthy mouth. The average life span of dentures is five to seven years.

Dentures may need to be relined or replaced as the mouth changes with age.

### Dental implants

Dental implants are a popular and successful alternative for replacing missing teeth. They are special titanium posts that fuse directly to the bone and, unlike some procedures, do not destroy other teeth. An implant is treated like a natural tooth but is not as strong, so it is important to brush and floss gently. As the trend toward implants escalates, so too does the specialized knowledge required by the dental hygienist to advise clients before, during and after choosing implants.

### Oral cancer screening

Dental professionals perform regular screening for oral cancer. However, between visits, individuals should check their mouths and watch for red or white patches, sores that do not heal after a few days, swelling or changes in colour of the tissue. Also, check lips, all areas of the tongue, gums, palate, floor of the mouth and inside the cheeks. Report any changes to a dental professional.



*As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated healthcare 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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