

# BACKGROUNDER: DENTAL HYGIENE AND ORAL HEALTH

## About the Profession of Dental Hygiene

- There are approximately 12,500 registered, practising dental hygienists in Ontario; close to 7,500 are members of the Ontario Dental Hygienists' Association (ODHA).
- Dental hygiene is the third largest health-care profession in Ontario.
- Dental hygienists in Ontario see and treat more than 14 million clients a year.
- The provincial government recognizes dental hygiene as a major contributor and partner in Ontario's health-care system — and that it is an integral part of the government's approach to the delivery of oral care services.
- More than 45 per cent of the dental hygienists in Ontario are authorized to self-initiate and more than 250 operate independent clinics and mobile practices.
- Dental hygienists work in a variety of public and private health-care settings including public health, education, research, hospitals, and industry as well as in traditional private dental offices and as independent business owners.
- As important members of the oral health-care team, dental hygienists have a distinctive clinical and educational role in preventing gum disease and tooth decay with a primary concern for promoting good oral health.
- Dental hygienists not only scale (clean) teeth, they provide professional assessments, including oral cancer screening, plan and implement treatments, evaluate individual oral care needs, develop and customize preventive home care programs, and offer advice on other health areas such as nutrition, smoking cessation and bad breath.
- As regulated health-care professionals, dental hygienists must follow stringent rules and standards set by their regulatory college ([College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario](#)) to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.
- To practice in the province, dental hygienists must complete either the equivalent of a three-year post-secondary diploma program or a baccalaureate program at a university.

## About Oral Health and Overall Health

*(From a position paper entitled “Periodontal Disease as a Potential Risk Factor for Systemic Diseases,” published by the American Academy of Periodontology, May 1998, with further evidence presented in a position paper published by the Canadian Dental Association in 2005, “Association Between Periodontal Disease and Systemic Disease”.)*

- Several forms of bacteria are common in the mouth — several hundred different bacterial species have been found in the plaques of clients with periodontal (gum) disease.
- Periodontal disease is one of the most common human diseases, affecting as many as 75 per cent of adults over the age of 30 at some point in their lives.
- Left untreated, infective bacteria from gums can enter the bloodstream or airways, increasing the risk of stroke, heart and respiratory diseases. Also, controlling diabetes is more difficult in the presence of gum disease. Dental hygienists prevent gum disease by removing the buildup of plaque bacteria that collect at the gum line.
- Oral bacteria can cause up to 10 per cent of community-acquired pneumonia and 25 per cent of hospital-acquired pneumonia.
- People with periodontal disease have a 1.5 to 2.0 fold greater risk of incurring fatal heart disease than those without periodontal disease.
- Those with periodontal disease suffered strokes twice as often as those with good oral health.
- While diabetes can lead to periodontal disease, seven out of nine people with diabetes who were successfully treated for gum disease reduced their need for insulin.
- Oral infections in the mouth are associated with pre-term low birth weight babies.
- The estimated risk for smokers developing periodontal disease is more than twice that of nonsmokers.

Keeping mouths healthy – for a lifetime  
Healthy smiles for seniors  
Open Wide! A Window to Good Health  
Oral Health Facts