

Dental hygiene: Keeping mouths healthy — for a lifetime

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Oral health is an important part of overall health. Most people don't connect their mouths to the rest of their bodies. There is a link. As a result of extensive and ongoing research, the connection between oral infections and other diseases in the body is becoming understood and accepted within the health-care community.

As important members of the oral health-care team, dental hygienists provide professional treatment, public education and customized home care programs to help prevent gum disease and tooth decay, as well as support and promote total wellness.

Gum or periodontal disease is one of the most common diseases in humans. According to the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, as many as 75 per cent of adults over the age of 30 may suffer from some form of gum disease at some point in their lives. It is an infectious condition that can result in the oral pain, tooth loss and inflammatory destruction of gum tissue and bone. It can start with swollen and tender gums that bleed when flossing and brushing the teeth.

Left untreated, infective bacteria can enter the bloodstream or airways, thereby increasing the chances of heart disease, stroke and respiratory disorders. Gum disease may worsen existing diabetes or increase complications associated with diabetes.

Dental hygienists help control the bacterial causing gum disease and tooth decay. They work with their clients to help keep their mouth healthy and in so doing they make an important contribution to their overall health.

Your partners in oral health

Dental hygienists are regulated health-care professionals, primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. They have a distinctive clinical and educational role in preventing disease and keeping mouths healthy.

In addition to cleaning teeth, dental hygienists also take medical history; examine the head, neck and mouth; plan and implement treatments; record health changes; contact physicians to ensure clients at risk are properly medicated prior to treatment; make referrals to oral surgeons and dermatologists when suspicious sores or lesions are detected during oral cancer screening; confer with other health-care providers and develop in-home care programs.

Maintaining good oral health and overall health requires a collaborative or "team" approach. Dental hygienists work with many health-care professionals, including physicians, periodontists, oral surgeons, nutritionists, pharmacists, dietitians, as well as dentists.

For those who are physically unable to travel to a dental office, are pressed for time or prefer a home setting, recent legislative changes enable dental hygienists to provide their services outside the traditional dental office. The public can now choose how and where they want to receive their preventive oral care.

For added convenience, independently run dental hygiene clinics and mobile services increase access to affordable oral care, especially important for residents in long-term care

homes, the homebound, low-income families, the uninsured and those living in remote communities.

Tips for a healthy mouth

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 oral hygiene

Brush natural teeth twice a day with a soft toothbrush and fluoridated toothpaste. 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 is easy to grasp for a more thorough cleaning. **Floss** once a day to clean between teeth. One-handed flossers are available for those who have difficulty with traditional flossing. Dental hygienists suggest other easy-to-use tools for oral care such as rubber tip or 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 professional.

Denture care

For those wearing full or partial dentures, it is still important to have a clean mouth and to have regular check-ups to prevent oral problems. Dentures need to be cleaned thoroughly to loosen and remove food debris and plaque and reduce odours. Proper denture care can extend their life and contribute to a healthy mouth. Dentures may need to be relined or replaced as the mouth changes with age.

Dental hygiene tip: Soak dentures in a solution of one teaspoon vinegar in one cup of water, then brush with regular toothpaste.

Dry mouth

There are a number of causes for a decrease in saliva flow, including medications for high blood pressure, heart problems, 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 gum disease. It can also affect chewing, speaking, swallowing and ability to taste. To help relieve dry mouth, dental hygienists suggest sipping water throughout the day, chewing sugarless gum or sucking on sugarless mints, or using oral lubricants available over the counter.

Oral cancer screening

Dental hygienists perform regular screening for oral cancer. However, between visits, individuals can check their mouths and watch for red or white patches, sores that do not heal after a few days, swellings and lumps 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.

Customized treatments

In preparation for a dental hygiene appointment, clients should provide a list of medications and information on recent surgeries so that the dental hygienist knows how to customize the treatment and home care. Some medications could make certain procedures and products less effective.

Learn more about dental hygiene services and maintaining good oral care and overall health at www.odha.on.ca or call 1-800-315-6342.