

Dental Care for Older Adults

Why is dental care important?

Just because you've gotten older does not mean you have outgrown the need to take care of your teeth and to see a dentist regularly. In fact, there may be an even greater need to care for your teeth for the following reasons:

- As you get older, your mouth may make less saliva, which means that some of its natural cleansing action may be lost and it may become very acidic, causing more decay.
- Medicines can also cause the mouth to be drier.
- The gums shrink and expose new areas of teeth to possible infection or decay.
- Dentures may not fit as well because of changes in the gums and the jawbones.
- The risk of oral cancer is higher.

Brushing

Teeth can last a lifetime if they are looked after. The most effective thing you can do is brushing your teeth. Brush them in the morning and again before going to bed at night. Use a soft brush and get a new brush every 6 months. Pay attention to the gum line when you brush. Also brushing the roof of the mouth and the tongue gently will help remove germs and prevent bad breath. Brushing after each meal is best. If you can only brush once a day, it is best to do it at bedtime. Electric toothbrushes can be very helpful if you have arthritis.

Ask your dentist or dental hygienist to show you the proper way to brush your teeth.

Dentures

If you wear dentures, take them out to clean them. You may want to take them out at bedtime, let them soak in warm (not hot) water or a denture-cleansing solution overnight, and then brush them in the morning. Always soak them if they are out of your mouth because keeping dentures dry may cause them to get very brittle or they may warp.

Always use a special denture brush that will reach all parts of the dentures. A regular toothbrush will not do the job. You can use soap, toothpaste, or bicarbonate of soda to clean dentures, but denture paste removes stains better. Never use any household cleansers to remove stains. It's a good idea to brush your dentures over a wash basin half full of water. If they slip from your fingers, they are less likely to crack if they land in water.

While your dentures are out of your mouth, clean your tongue, gums, and the roof of your mouth with a soft toothbrush and then rinse your mouth.

Flossing

If you still have your own teeth, flossing will remove germs and food particles from between the teeth and along the gum line where brushing doesn't always reach. Insert the floss between the teeth, using a gentle sawing motion. Move the floss up and down the side of each tooth. Always use a new section of floss when you put it between the next pair of teeth.

Toothpaste and mouthwash

Use a toothpaste that has fluoride and is recommended by the American Dental Association. Tartar-control toothpaste may be helpful. Rinsing with an alcohol-free antibacterial mouthwash can help reduce plaque.

Regular dental checkups

Yearly dental checkups are recommended, even if you have full dentures. During your checkup, your dentist will remove any plaque and check your teeth for cavities. Your dentist will also check your gums for infection or inflammation and the rest of your mouth for signs of cancer.

If you have red or white spots or other sores in the mouth that do not go away within 2 weeks, see your dentist. Mouth sores that do not go away can be an early sign of oral cancer. Early detection of mouth cancer allows the best chance for survival.

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