

Oral health for seniors

How can I take care of my teeth?

Proper oral care can keep you smiling well into retirement. Brushing at least twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristle brush are as important as ever. Flossing can help you save your teeth by removing plaque between teeth and below the gum line that your toothbrush cannot reach.

What are some problems I should watch for? Gingivitis. Most people don't realize how important it is to take care of their gums. Gingivitis is caused by the bacteria found in plaque that attack the gums. Symptoms of gingivitis include red, swollen gums and possible bleeding when you brush. If you have any of these symptoms, see a dentist at once. Gingivitis can lead to gum disease if problems persist. Three out of four adults over age 35 are affected by some sort of gum (periodontal) disease. In gum disease, the infection becomes severe. Your gums begin to recede, pulling back from the teeth. In the worst cases, bacteria form pockets between the teeth and gums, weakening the bone. All this can lead to tooth loss if untreated, especially in patients with osteoporosis.

If regular oral care is too difficult, your dentist can provide alternatives to aid in flossing and prescribe medication to keep the infection from getting worse.

What if it's too difficult to brush?

If you have arthritis, you may find it difficult to brush and floss for good oral health care and prevention of disease. Ask your dentist for ways to overcome this problem. Certain dental products are designed to make dental care less painful for arthritis sufferers. You may want to try strapping the toothbrush to a larger object, such as a ball, to make the brush more comfortable to handle, or electric toothbrushes can help by doing some of the work for you.

What are the signs of oral cancer?

Oral cancer most often occurs in people over 40 years of age. See a dentist immediately if you notice any red or white patches on your gums or tongue, and watch for sores that fail to heal within two weeks. Unfortunately, oral cancer is often difficult to detect in its early stages, when it can be cured easily. Your dentist can perform a head and neck exam to screen for signs of cancer. Since oral cancer is often painless in its early stages, many patients will not notice the signs until it is too late. In addition, many older people, especially those who wear dentures, do not visit their dentists enough and problems go unseen.

Should I be concerned about dry mouth?

Dry mouth (xerostomia) happens when salivary glands fail to work due to disease, certain medications or cancer treatment. This can make it hard to eat, swallow, taste and speak. In certain cases, such as radiation therapy, dry mouth can lead to severe complications, which is why it is important you see a dentist immediately before beginning any form of cancer treatment. Drinking lots of water and avoiding sweets, tobacco, alcohol and caffeine are some ways to fight dry mouth. Your dentist also can prescribe medications to fight severe dry mouth.

Maintaining your overall health

Studies have shown that maintaining a healthy mouth may keep your body healthier and help you avoid diabetes, heart disease and stroke. The best way to achieve good oral health is to visit your dentist for a cleaning at least twice a year.