



ORAL HEALTH TIPS FOR SENIORS

Staying healthy and looking good are two main wishes of today's seniors. Exercising and eating right are important. Equally important as good general health for seniors is good oral care of teeth and gums. Simply by brushing twice a day with fluoride, toothpaste and flossing daily seniors can avoid many oral health problems. Regular dental checkups and having their teeth professionally cleaned are also important.

As people age, subtle changes occur in the mouth. Many seniors suffer from dry mouth, a condition that occurs when the salivary glands do not provide enough saliva to keep the mouth moist. This can lead to tooth decay, increased rates of periodontal (gum) disease, burning mouth syndrome, and trouble speaking, swallowing and tasting food. Often, the prescription drugs seniors are taking cause these conditions. More than 400 drugs, many popular with seniors, can interfere with good dental health. Seniors should let a dental professional know what medications they are taking.

Oral cancer among Colorado seniors is a significant concern. According to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, on average, 318 new cases of oral cancer are diagnosed and 72 deaths occur each year in Colorado. Again pointing to the importance of a regular dental checkup, dentists can examine oral tissues for cancerous or pre-cancerous lesions. As with all cancers, early detection is key to survival.

Three out of four adults will experience gum (periodontal) disease at some time in their life. However, it can often be prevented or treated in its early stages. Severe periodontal disease causes damage to the gums, bone and other structures that support the teeth. Regular checkups along with twice-daily brushing with a fluoride toothpaste and once-daily flossing are the best ways of preventing costly dental problems.

Many seniors suffer from arthritis or have other dexterity problems, making it difficult for them to brush and floss. They should consider these tips:

- ? Use a wide elastic band to attach the toothbrush handle to the hand.
- ? Enlarge the toothbrush handle with a piece of wood or plastic.
- ? Use an electric toothbrush.
- ? Tie the ends of floss together, making a circle before flossing.
- ? Use a floss holder.

Other recommendations for good oral health include:

- ? Avoid tobacco. Smokers have 7 times the risk of developing gum disease compared to nonsmokers).
- ? Limit alcohol. Heavy use of alcohol is a risk factor for oral and throat cancers.
- ? Eat wisely. Avoiding sugars and starches when snacking applies to adults as well as children.



More Oral Health Tips for Seniors

As we age, subtle to serious changes occur in the mouth, gums and teeth. Teeth may lose their whiteness and darken in color as we age. Also, plaque a colorless layer of bacteria builds up on teeth faster as we grow older. The risk of gum disease also is higher as we grow older. The bacteria found in plaque create toxins that inflame the gums and cause gum tissue to separate from the teeth. Left untreated, gum disease may damage the bone that holds teeth in place, possibly causing tooth loss. Other factors contributing to gum disease are dentures that do not fit, poor oral hygiene, illnesses and many medications.

Many seniors experience the problem of gums moving back from the teeth, which exposes tooth roots to plaque. This can result in teeth that are sensitive to temperature and are more at risk of decay.

Another symptom of the aging process that relates to oral health is dry mouth. It is caused by reduced saliva (spit) flow, which can lead to tooth damage. This is often caused by medicines seniors take for diseases such as depression, allergies, hearth problems or high blood pressure. Saliva helps wash away acids caused by plaque. Saliva also contains minerals that rinse tooth surfaces and keep them strong. When saliva flow is in short supply, teeth can decay more easily.

Visit the dentist regularly. Dentists are trained to detect problems caused by the aging process. Early detection of gum disease and cavities decreases the need for more extensive and expensive treatment of the mouth, gums and teeth. Brush your teeth at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and floss once a day. Avoid tobacco and limit alcohol, which are risk factors for oral and throat cancers especially when combined. Follow a healthy diet that includes fewer sugars and starches.

Remember, good health starts with a smart mouth.



Questions and Answers About Dentures

The American Dental Association supplied the following information:

Q: Now that I have dentures, do I really need to see the dentist as often as before?

A: Even if you no longer have your natural teeth, you should see your dentist regularly for oral examination. The dentist will examine your mouth to check for any problem with the gum ridges, the tongue and the joints of the jaw, as well as screen for oral cancer.

For a variety of reasons, many older adults are more susceptible to oral diseases, including oral cancer. About 95 percent of all cancers are found in people over age 40. However, many of these cancers are treatable if detected early.

Oral tissues are also checked for signs of other diseases than can show up first in the mouth.

Q: My dentures don't feel as comfortable as they once did. Before I see the dentist, should I try some different products myself the try to improve them?

A: Your dentures were made to fit just right. If they are cared for well, they do not change shape.

They can become loose due to natural changes in the gums and bone supporting them. As the jawbone begins to shrink, so do the gums. When your dentures do not fit properly, see your dentist as soon as possible so changes can be made. Do not try to change the fit of your dentures yourself, or with heat. This can damage them, they may not be able to be repaired, and they may have to be replaced.

Dentures that don't fit and attempts to repair them at home can cause irritated gums, tongue and cheeks. In emergencies, items used to make the dentures stick can be used to until you see the dentist.

If your denture is loose, have your dentist check it.