

Oral Health Care for Older Patients

As we age, our mouth, teeth and gums go through many changes. Knowing what to expect and being prepared to deal with these changes can make all the difference in your oral health and lifestyle. Most people over 50 have experienced some form of gum (periodontal) disease and tooth-root decay. Many cavities occur around the edges of old fillings. That's why regular brushing with a fluoride toothpaste, regular flossing, adhering to an orally healthy & nutritious diet, and visiting your dentist regularly are more important than ever.

TALK TO YOUR DENTIST – tell your dentist about any health problems and medications you are taking to assure you receive the most appropriate dental treatments.

See your dentist at the first signs of:

- pain
- cavities
- pus between gums and teeth
- any mouth sore that bleeds easily and persists longer than two weeks
- a swelling, lump, rough spot, crust or small eroded area anywhere in or about the mouth or neck; white or red patches in the mouth or on the lips
- tenderness or numbness
- gums that are red, swollen, tender or bleed easily
- a change in the way your teeth fit together

CHANGES IN YOUR MOUTH...WHAT OLDER ADULTS SHOULD KNOW

- Teeth may seem to darken with age because changes in dentin (material beneath enamel) may cause teeth to appear slightly darker.
- Plaque (sticky, colorless layer of bacteria that causes cavities) may build up faster and in greater amounts.

- Teeth may become more dry and brittle, and are more likely to crack or break under normal chewing pressure.
- Years of chewing may wear down tooth enamel, and teeth may become more sensitive and prone to breakage.
- Gums may recede due to periodontal disease and brushing too forcefully. This increases the risk of tooth-root decay – a serious problem.
- Mouth dryness from reduced saliva flow is a side effect of many medications, but not a normal part of aging. Saliva rinses and protects the mouth and teeth, removing food and decay-causing acid.
- Old fillings may fracture or leak around the edges, allowing decay-causing bacteria to accumulate in the tiny crevices.
- Oral cancer occurs more frequently in older individuals. Oral cancer can affect the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, tongue and the hard or soft palate.
- Be aware that poor diet, poor oral hygiene, medical diseases, some medications and treatments, and ill-fitting dentures or bridges can increase the chances for tooth decay and gum disease.
- Fluoride is just as important in preventing cavities in adults as in children. Use a fluoride toothpaste and drink plenty of fluoridated water.
- For dry mouth, your dentist might recommend sugar-free candy or gum to stimulate saliva flow. Artificial saliva or oral rinses may also be appropriate.

Keeping your natural teeth for a lifetime is largely up to you. Brush and floss your teeth VERY regularly, eat a balanced diet, and visit your dentist at least twice a year.



Ask your dentist for tips if you have trouble holding a toothbrush or floss.

Try widening the handle of the toothbrush with a sponge or adhesive tape. Try an electric toothbrush and/or a commercial floss holder.