

# Facts of Life

Due to advances in medicine and an increase in prolonged life expectancy, the number of older people will continue to increase worldwide. It is essential that all older adults practice and maintain good oral hygiene due to the high correlation between oral health and general health.

## How should I care for my teeth as I get older?

Maintaining good oral health is not only vital to your systemic health—it can keep you smiling well into retirement. Brushing at least twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste and a soft-bristle brush is as important as ever. Flossing is very important, too—it helps to remove plaque from between teeth and below the gumline that your toothbrush cannot reach.

## Am I more prone to certain oral conditions as I age?

As you age, you may be more likely to develop gingivitis. Gingivitis is caused by the bacteria found in plaque that attack the gums. Symptoms of gingivitis include red, swollen gums and bleeding when you brush. If you have these symptoms, see a dentist.

Gingivitis can lead to periodontal disease if problems persist. In the worst cases, bacteria form in pockets between the teeth and gums, weakening the bone and causing the gums to recede, pulling back from teeth. This can lead to tooth loss if left untreated.

As you age, changes in salivary flow and content may further lead to gingivitis, as well as cavities. Because approximately 80 percent of all American adults suffer from some form of gingivitis, it's important to see your dentist twice a year for regular cleanings and checkups. If regular oral care is too difficult for you (see be-

low), your dentist can provide alternatives to aid in brushing and flossing.

## What if arthritis makes brushing too difficult?

Certain dental products are designed to make dental care less painful for people who have arthritis. It is sometimes recommended that people with arthritis try securing their toothbrush to a wider object, such as a ruler, to ease arthritic hand pain while brushing. Electric toothbrushes also can help by doing some of the work for you. Ask your dentist for other suggestions.

## What are the signs of oral cancer?

Oral cancer is one of the most common cancers, with roughly 35,000 new cases reported annually in the United States. Oral cancer most often occurs in people who are older than age 40. Oral cancer can form in any part of the mouth or throat. If not diagnosed and treated in its early stages, oral cancer can spread, leading to chronic pain, loss of function, irreparable facial and oral disfigurement following surgery, and even death. Oral cancer has one of the lowest five-year survival rates of all cancers; this is primarily due to late diagnosis. See a dentist immediately if you notice any of the following: red or white patches on your gums or tongue, a sore that fails to heal within two weeks, bleeding in your mouth, loose teeth, problems or pain swallowing, or a lump in your neck. Your dentist should perform a head and neck exam to screen for oral cancer during routine checkups.

## What can I do about dry mouth?

As you age, you may develop dry mouth. Dry mouth (xerostomia) happens when salivary glands fail to work due to disease,



certain medications, or cancer treatment. The condition can make it hard to eat, swallow, taste, and speak. 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 ease the symptoms of severe dry mouth.

## What else can I do to maintain good oral health?

Studies have shown that maintaining a healthy mouth may keep your body healthier and help you to avoid diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Older patients who are planning to enter a nursing home should inquire about on-site dental care. People who do not have teeth still need to visit the dentist regularly, since many aspects of oral health, such as adjusting dentures and oral cancer screenings, can be handled during routine dental visits. The best way to achieve good oral health is to visit your dentist at least twice a year.