

Taking Care of Your Smile

Having a healthy smile means so much more than having healthy teeth. It means living free of oral problems and diseases. The word “oral” refers to the mouth, which includes the teeth, gums, and supporting tissues. It is easy to take your oral health for granted. But good oral health is key to living comfortably each day. The tissues in your mouth allow you to speak, smile, sigh, kiss, smell, taste, chew, and swallow. They also let you show a world of feelings through your expressions. Taking good care of these tissues can prevent disease in them and throughout your body.

Oral Health and Your Body

How are the tissues in your mouth linked to health problems in other places in your body?

- ◆ Did you ever hear the phrase, “the mouth is a mirror?” The health of your mouth can be a sign of your overall health. Many serious diseases, such as diabetes, HIV, and some eating disorders, show their first symptoms in the mouth. For that reason and others, it is very important for you to get complete, regular oral exams.
- ◆ Most of us think of problems with the mouth in terms of cavities, toothaches, and crooked or stained teeth. Not having healthy teeth and gums can influence how



we look, but it also affects the health of our bodies. For example:

- If you have gum disease, you may be more likely to get heart disease.
- If you having missing teeth, you may not feel as good about yourself as you could.
- If you have diabetes, you may be more likely to get gum disease.
- Studies show that if you have both diabetes and gum disease, you can have more problems controlling your blood glucose levels.

The Most Common Oral Health Problems: Cavities and Gum Disease

Dental cavities

Everyone is at risk of getting cavities throughout their lives. By the time most

people are adults, 85 percent of people will have had a cavity!

How do we get cavities?

- ◆ You naturally have bacteria (germs) in your mouth.
- ◆ The bacteria mix with your saliva and bits of food in your mouth to form a coating (dental plaque) that sticks to your teeth.
- ◆ Acids in the plaque wear away the teeth.
- ◆ These acids can get inside the teeth and create holes, or cavities.

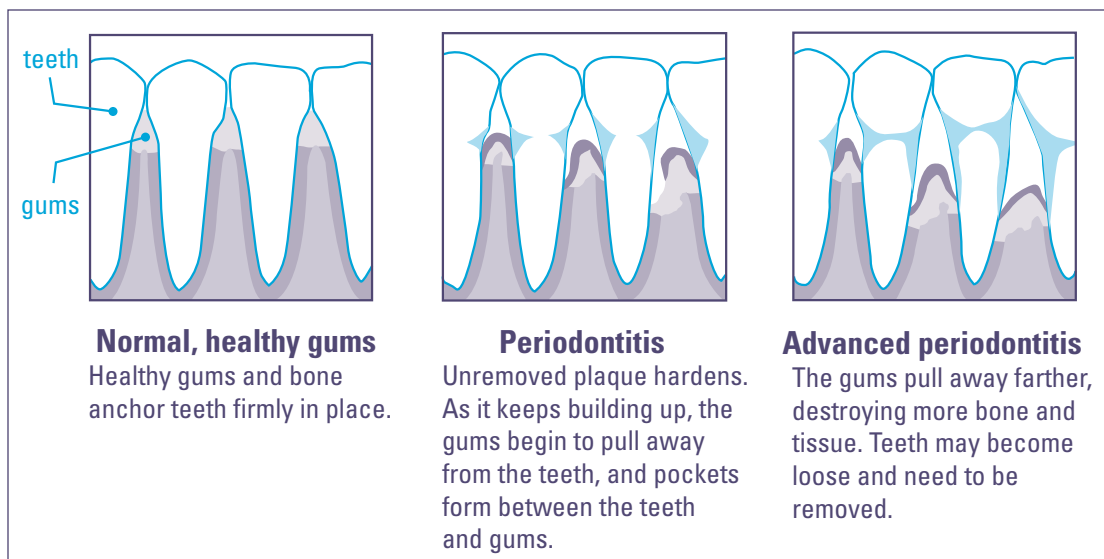
Gum diseases

Gum diseases become more common as we age. Most people show signs of them by their mid-30s. Gum disease is caused by infection or plaque around your teeth. They are the most common reason we lose our teeth after the age of 35.

Gingivitis [jin-ji-vie-tus] is the most common type of gum disease. In its first stage, gingivitis irritates the gums and causes them to bleed and swell. Periodontitis [pear-ee-o-don-tie-tus] is a more serious type of gum disease. If it is not treated, periodontitis gets worse because pockets of infection form between the teeth and gums. Then the gums grow away from teeth and lose supporting bone. If your teeth can't be supported, they could fall out.

This disease is caused by bacteria in your mouth. You may be more likely to be infected with these bacteria if

- ◆ someone else in your family has periodontitis
- ◆ you smoke
- ◆ you have a disease such as diabetes or HIV



Some other problems of the mouth include

Cold sores (herpes simplex virus type 1 [HSV-1] infections)

If you've ever had a cold sore, you're not alone. A half million people get one every year. Once you're exposed to this virus, it can hide in the body for years. The virus can cause tiredness, muscle aches, a sore throat, enlarged and tender lymph nodes, and cold sores. These sores or blisters are very contagious. They usually form on the lips. Sometimes the sores appear under the nose or under the chin. The sores heal in about 7 to 10 days without scarring.

What can trigger the virus?

- Getting too much sun
- Having mild fevers when you get a cold
- Being under stress

What can help you feel better?

- You can buy medicines at the drug store or grocery store to put on the cold sore. They will help to numb the area and relieve the pain.
- If cold sores are a problem for you, talk with your doctor or dentist about getting a prescription for an antiviral drug. It could help lower your chances of getting these kinds of viral infections.

Canker sores

These common, but mostly harmless, sores appear inside your mouth as ulcers. They have a white or gray base and a red border. Canker sores tend to be tiny. They usually heal by themselves in one to three weeks.

They occur in women more often than men, usually during women's periods. We don't know why they appear. But some experts believe that problems with the immune system—the system in our bodies that fights disease—may be involved. Bacteria or viruses could also be involved.

What can increase your chances of getting canker sores?

- Feeling tired
- Feeling stressed
- Having allergies
- Having a cut inside your cheek or on your tongue

What can help you feel better?

- If you get a large sore (about ½ inch in size), you may need to be treated with medicine.
- Stay away from hot and spicy foods.
- Use mild mouthwashes or salt water rinses.
- Dab the sore with a mixture of hydrogen peroxide and water, or milk of magnesia.

We don't know how to prevent canker sores. But if you get them often, tell your doctor, nurse, or dentist what might be irritating your mouth.

Oral fungal or yeast infections (candidiasis [can-di-die-uh-sis])

These infections appear as red or white lesions, flat or slightly raised, in the mouth. They are common among denture wearers. They occur most often in people who are

very young, elderly, or who have a problem with their immune system (the system in our bodies that fights disease). People who have dry mouth syndrome are also very likely to get oral yeast infections.

What can prevent these infections?

- These infections can be prevented with good oral hygiene.
- If you wear dentures, clean them and remove them at bedtime.

Talk with your doctor or dentist about medicines that may be helpful if you have a problem with these infections.

Dry mouth syndrome

This condition is common in many adults, especially as they age. It may make it hard to eat, swallow, taste, and speak. It happens when your salivary glands don't work right, often as a side effect from medicines or from other health problems. If left untreated, this lack of saliva can lead to cavities. It is saliva that helps get rid of bits of food in your mouth. Saliva also helps stop acid from forming plaque on your teeth.

Oral cancer

This cancer usually develops in people who are older than 40. It is often found when the cancer is in its late stages, when it is harder to

treat. Oral cancer is not usually painful, so you may not know you have it. And many people do not visit their dentists often enough to find the cancer early.

Oral cancer often starts as a tiny, unnoticed white or red spot or sore anywhere in the mouth. The most common places it develops are on the tongue, the lips, and the floor of the mouth. Using tobacco, especially with drinking alcohol, is the main cause of oral cancer.

What are the signs of oral cancer?

- A sore that bleeds easily or does not heal
- A change in color of the tissues in your mouth
- A lump, thickening, rough spot, crust, or small eroded area
- Pain, tenderness, or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips
- Problems chewing, swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or tongue
- A change in the way your teeth fit together

Oral problems from cancer therapies.

Treatments such as chemotherapy or radiation to the head and neck can cause dry mouth, tooth decay, painful mouth sores, and cracked, peeling lips.

Oral Health and Women

You need to have good oral hygiene at all stages of your life. As a woman, your changing hormone levels during puberty, menstruation (your monthly period), and menopause cause changes in your mouth.

Hormone changes can cause

- ◆ frequent cold sores and canker sores
- ◆ gingivitis during puberty
- ◆ dry mouth (often also linked to using certain medicines)

Visit the National Women's Health Information Center web site www.womenshealth.gov

- ◆ changes in sensation or taste
- ◆ increased risk of gum disease
- ◆ bone weakness before, during, and after menopause

Oral Health and Pregnancy

If you are pregnant, you have special oral health needs.

Try to have a complete oral exam done before you become pregnant or very early in your pregnancy. All dental work that you



need should be done before the pregnancy or between the fourth and sixth month of pregnancy. You can get treatment for an urgent problem during pregnancy, but it can present risks to your baby. Treatments are most dangerous during the first three months of a pregnancy. If you are in the last three months of pregnancy, you may get dental treatment. You may find the dental chair uncomfortable, though.

Some pregnant women get gum disease, a problem called pregnancy gingivitis. It increases their chances for getting more serious gum disease. This condition can be caused by poor oral hygiene and increased hormone levels during pregnancy. It may make you less likely to brush your teeth and floss the right way or as much as you should. Pregnant women with gum diseases are much more likely to have premature babies of low birth weight.

To control your risk for inflammation of your gums and oral disease,

- ◆ Start practicing good oral hygiene, if you haven't already.
- ◆ Eat a healthy diet.
- ◆ Be thorough when brushing your teeth daily.
- ◆ Floss your teeth and gums daily.

Oral Health and New Mothers

What should you know?

- ◆ Don't put your baby's toys, spoons, pacifiers, and other items in your mouth. The



same germs that cause tooth decay in your mouth can be passed onto your baby.

- ◆ Wipe your baby's teeth and gums with a soft cloth or a baby's toothbrush after each nursing and feeding. That quick action can help remove the sugars found in milk, which can cause tooth decay.
- ◆ If you bottle-feed your baby, stop by age one.
- ◆ Never put your baby to bed with a bottle of milk or juice.
- ◆ Never place a pacifier covered with honey or sugar in your baby's mouth when he or she sleeps.
- ◆ Sucking on a bottle when lying down can destroy your baby's teeth. It can cause years of tooth pain and problems with eating.

Pediatricians and pediatric dentists suggest that all babies have an oral exam between one and two years old. This exam checks your baby for any problems in the mouth and with the way you might be feeding him or her. You also can learn how to properly care for your child's teeth and mouth.

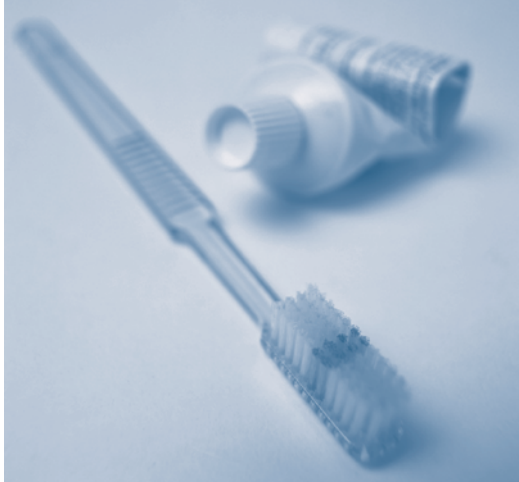
Toothpastes and Mouthwashes

You can choose from so many types of toothpastes these days. Some say they're made for whitening your teeth. Others say they reduce gingivitis and plaque. Others suggest they're made just for people with sensitive teeth.

What should you know?

- ◆ As long as the toothpaste contains fluoride and its box shows the American Dental Association's (ADA) seal of acceptance, the toothpaste is good for your oral health. If your toothpaste meets those two conditions, then it's just a personal choice which brand and type to use.
- ◆ Mouthwashes claim to freshen your breath. But they really only mask bad odors in your mouth for a few hours. If you use a breath freshener regularly to hide bad mouth odor, see your dentist.
- ◆ If you need extra help controlling plaque, your dentist might suggest using an anti-septic mouth rinse. Many of these products are accepted by the ADA because they





reduce plaque and gum disease. They also help kill the germs that cause bad breath.

- ◆ You also may want to use a fluoride mouth rinse, along with brushing and flossing, to help prevent tooth decay.

Tooth Whitening or Bleaching

You might want to whiten your teeth more than is possible through regular brushing, flossing, and dental checkups. You have several options. They vary in price and in how well they work.

What should you know?

- ◆ **Chairside bleaching or “power bleaching.”** In your dentist’s office, he or she applies a gel or a rubber shield to protect your gums and oral tissues. Then a bleach is put on your teeth. Ask your dentist if the bleaching agents have the ADA seal of acceptance. A special light or a laser may be used to help the bleach work better.

But no products that use lasers are accepted right now by the ADA. If you and your dentist use this method, you may have to visit your dentist more than once. You will see results right away, usually your teeth will be about five shades brighter. It works well on different types of stains on your teeth.

- ◆ **Professionally dispensed bleaching solutions.** You get these products from your dentist, but you use them at home. They contain peroxide(s), which actually bleach the tooth enamel. Most of these solutions are in gel form. The solution is then placed in a mouth guard or tray that fits inside your mouth around your teeth. How long you use them depends on what results you’re looking for and if you are sensitive to the bleach. Some products are made to be used about twice a day for two weeks. Others are used overnight for one to two weeks. They work well on many types of stains on your teeth. You can get your teeth about six shades brighter with long-lasting results.



- ◆ **Over-the-counter, TV, and Internet products.** You can buy these products through many different sources and use them at home. They include whitening strips, paint-on products, and gels and trays. They have a low amount of peroxide. You wear some of these products during the day. With other products, you apply them at night before bedtime. They have limited results if you use them before you have a professional remove the stains. But they can help prolong the results you get from this earlier treatment. They can help with stains that result from age and certain foods. You can get about two shades brighter for up to six months. None of these gels and trays are accepted by the ADA.
- ◆ **Whitening toothpastes.** All toothpastes help remove surface staining of your teeth through their mild abrasives. “Whitening” toothpastes with the ADA seal have special polishing agents that remove even more stains. Unlike bleaches, these products do not change the actual color of

Talk with your dentist *before* you use any whitening products. Your dentist can help you decide which method is best for the type of stains on your teeth. Not all products will work on all people. The options offered by your dentist can be expensive. Be certain to ask what results you can really expect. Remember: whitening your teeth alone does not make your mouth any healthier.



your teeth. They help with slight surface stains only. You get temporary results of perhaps one to two shades brighter.

Keep Smiling! Steps You Can Take to Keep Your Mouth Healthy

1. Brush your teeth at least twice each day, first thing in the morning and before going to bed. Once a day, use floss or an interdental cleaner to clean between teeth to remove food that your toothbrush missed.

- ◆ Drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste. Fluoride protects teeth against dental decay at any age. You also may want to use a fluoride mouth rinse, along with brushing and flossing, to help prevent tooth decay.

- ◆ Gently brush all sides of your teeth with a soft-bristled brush and a fluoride toothpaste. Use circular and short back-and-forth strokes.
- ◆ Take time to brush along the gum line. Lightly brush your tongue to help remove plaque and food debris.
- ◆ Ask your dentist to show you the best way to floss your teeth.
- ◆ Change your toothbrush at least every three months or earlier if the toothbrush looks worn. A new toothbrush can remove more plaque than a toothbrush that's more than three months old.
- ◆ If you wear dentures, be sure to remove them at night. Clean them before putting them back in your mouth the next morning.

2. Have a healthy lifestyle.

- ◆ Eat healthy meals. Brush your teeth, gums, and tongue after meals to lessen your chances of tooth decay. Don't snack on sugary or starchy foods between meals.
- ◆ Don't smoke. Smoking raises your risk of getting gum disease, oral and throat cancers, and oral fungal infections.
- ◆ If you drink alcohol, only drink it in moderation. For women, that means no more than one drink per day. For men, that means no more than two drinks per day. Heavy alcohol use increases your risk of getting oral and throat cancers. When alcohol and tobacco are used together, your risk of oral cancer is even greater than if you only drank or only smoked.



3. Get regular checkups.

- ◆ Have an oral exam twice a year, so your dentist can find any signs of problems early. During regular checkups, dentists and other types of dental providers can find signs of nutritional deficiencies, diseases, infections, immune disorders, injuries, and some cancers.
- ◆ Make an appointment right away if you have any of these problems:
 - Your gums bleed often.
 - You see any red or white patches on the gums or tongue.

Other Types of Dental Providers

- Dental hygienists. They work as part of your dentist's staff. They clean patient's gums and teeth. They instruct patients on the ways they can prevent oral disease and maintain their oral health.
- Periodontists. These dentists treat gum disease and place dental implants, or artificial teeth, to replace lost teeth.
- Oral surgeons. These dentists can perform biopsies, which means taking a sample of tissue from your mouth so they can look at it under a microscope. They can also perform surgery on your mouth and supporting tissues if you have a serious problem.

- You have pain in your mouth or jaw pain that won't go away.
- You have sores in your mouth that do not heal within two weeks.
- You have problems swallowing or chewing.

4. Follow your dentist's advice.

Your dentist may suggest more ways that you can keep your mouth healthy. He or she can teach you how to properly floss or brush, and how often. He or she might suggest preventive steps or treatments to keep your mouth healthy.

5. If you have another health problem, it may affect your oral health.

- ◆ If you take medicines that give you a dry mouth, ask your doctor or nurse if there's another medication you can use instead. Consider using a saliva substitute.
- ◆ Have an oral exam before beginning cancer treatment to help prevent or limit other oral problems or tissue damage.
- ◆ If you have diabetes, practice good oral hygiene to prevent gum disease. Ask your dentist about the best way to brush and floss. Tell your dentist about your condition. Try to schedule your dental appointments for the mornings, when your blood glucose levels are likely to be the most stable. On the morning of your office visit, eat a light, healthy breakfast.

Then and Now

In 1945, fluoride was introduced into community water systems in the United States. Today, most Americans are exposed to fluoride from different sources, such as water, toothpaste, mouth rinses, and some foods. For years now, water fluoridation has reduced pain and suffering related to tooth decay. It has reduced tooth loss. It has reduced time lost from school and work to care for teeth problems. It has also reduced the amount of money that Americans spend on dental care. Fluoridation has been a major reason why tooth decay has been declining in this country.