



Oral Health Changes as We Age

Our mouth, teeth and gums may go through many changes as we age. Seniors face a range of special oral health concerns, including tooth decay and periodontal disease. Seniors also have an increasing amount of tooth decay compared to younger adults. These conditions may become more prevalent as people age.

The majority of people over age 50 are more affected by some form of gum or periodontal disease. Oral cancer is also more common in older individuals. Practicing proven oral disease prevention, no matter what age, by brushing with a fluoride toothpaste, flossing, drinking fluoridated water, having an orally healthy and nutritious diet, avoiding tobacco products and making regular dental visits are as important than ever before.

As we age, it is important to understand that many changes in our mouth, teeth and gums are due to past or present oral disease.

- Gums may recede and the bone supporting the teeth may be lost due to plaque and calculus build up causing periodontal disease.
- Because root surfaces are not as strong as the chewing surfaces of teeth, receding gums can expose tooth root surfaces making them more susceptible to tooth decay.

- Loss of bone due to periodontal disease may cause teeth to loosen and eventually be removed.
- Oral cancer can occur more frequently in older individuals and can affect the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, tongue, hard and soft palates and floor of the mouth.
- Teeth may become more dry and brittle and may be more likely to crack or break.
- Years of chewing may wear down tooth enamel making teeth more sensitive.
- Mouth dryness may develop as a side effect of some medications increasing the risk of tooth decay.
- Old fillings may fracture.
- Bone shrinkage under dentures may occur from long-time wear.
- Teeth may appear to darken with age.

Knowing what to expect and how to deal with these changes can make a big difference in seniors' oral health and lifestyle. Seniors should follow their dentist's advice regarding their oral health.

- Be aware that a poor diet, poor oral hygiene, development of medical diseases, some medications used and treatments related to medical diseases, and ill-fitting dentures or bridges can increase the risk of tooth decay, bone loss and periodontal disease.
- Fluoride is just as important in preventing cavities by making teeth stronger in adults as well as in children. Use fluoride toothpaste and drink plenty of fluoridated water.

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- For dry mouth, your dentist might recommend artificial saliva, oral rinses, sugar-free candy (lemon drops) or gum to stimulate salivary flow.
- Tobacco products should not be used in any form.
- Tell your dentist about any other health problems and medications you are taking to update your health history and to assure the most appropriate dental treatments.
- Ask your dentist for tips to holding a toothbrush or floss if you have difficulty doing so. Widening the handle of the toothbrush with a sponge or adhesive tape may be more helpful. In a few instances, an electric toothbrush or floss holder will be helpful.
- See your dentist regularly, but at the first signs of trouble (pain; tenderness; numbness; gums that bleed easily or are red or swollen; swelling, lump, thickening or 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; a sore that bleeds easily or does not heal; a change in the way your teeth fit together; difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw or tongue), you should see your dentist as quickly as possible.
- Keeping your mouth healthy for a lifetime is a wise choice you can make by using proven oral disease prevention practices and visiting your dentist regularly.