

SENIOR RESOURCES GUIDE

All You Need to Know About Oral Health



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Oral Hygiene for Older Adults

Suzanne Pollak | Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington

A winning smile can brighten anyone's day. It can even turn a quick greeting into a meaningful relationship.

But what if dental problems due to neglect, lack of insurance or just the natural results of getting older have changed the way you feel about yourself, causing you to keep your lips pursed, not wanting to smile at all?

In this Senior Resources Guide, written by the Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington, we will look into what can be done to avoid poor dental health. Brushing daily is important as is having regular dental checkups. But as people age, more can be done to make sure your smile lights up a room.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, older Americans with the poorest health tend to be economically disadvantaged, lack insurance or are members of racial and ethnic minorities. Dental problems, like so many other health issues, can increase with age.

Poor oral health can manifest itself in many ways. Untreated tooth decay can result in multiple problems, including tooth loss. According to the CDC, nearly one in five adults who are 65 years and older have lost at least some of their teeth. Complete tooth loss is twice as prevalent among those who have reached the age

of 75 as compared to those between the ages of 65 and 74.

When people are missing teeth or wearing dentures, they may find themselves preferring soft foods, thereby affecting their nutrition. Fresh fruits and vegetables tend to be harder to chew and therefore less desirable to those without a full set of teeth.

Gum disease is another common problem for older adults. About two in three adults who are 65 years or older suffer from gum disease.

So as basic as this may seem, this Senior Resources Guides begins with the fundamentals of brushing and flossing.

According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, everyone should brush their teeth twice a day with a small dab of fluoride toothpaste. For older adults, a small-headed toothbrush may be preferable as it is easier for cleaning around back teeth.

Be sure and angle the bristles toward the gum line to help clean between the gums and teeth. Brush gently using small circular motions and make sure to brush both the front and back of your teeth. Also, brush your tongue. There's no need to rinse afterward to better retain some of that fluoride.

Flossing is important as it removes dental plaque from between teeth where a toothbrush can't necessarily reach. When plaque builds up, tooth decay and gum disease often result.

According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, it is OK to use floss that is

waxed, unwaxed, flavored or plain. Just pick the type you prefer.

First, cut off a string that is about one foot in length. Wrap a piece around the middle finger of each hand, and then grip the floss between your thumb and index finger on each hand. Ease the floss between your teeth until it reaches the gum line. Don't force it into place as that may harm the gums. Then curve the floss into a shape similar to the letter "C" around each tooth, always keeping it in contact with the tooth. Side the floss up and down.

Repeat this for both sides of each tooth, one side at a time. Continue to move the floss slightly as you go from tooth to tooth so that you are always using a clean section. Don't forget the backs of the last teeth on each side of your mouth.

Flossing can be tricky. If you find that there are certain spots that are harder to floss than others, there are tools that can help. These can be found at a local pharmacy.

Floss holders are plastic with a handle that holds the floss in place. Floss threaders are plastic loops that make it easier to floss hard-to-reach or tight spaces. They are recommended for people whose teeth are crowded or have crowns, caps and bridges.

Dental water jets spray water between teeth to help clean them. Interdental brushes are tiny brushes shaped like a cylinder and clean between teeth.

For clean teeth and gums, the National Institutes of Health recommends:

- Gently brush your teeth on all sides with a soft-bristle

brush and fluoride toothpaste.

- Replace your toothbrush every three to four months.
- Use small circular motions and short back-and-forth strokes.
- Brush carefully and gently along your gum line.
- Lightly brush your tongue or use a tongue scraper to help keep your mouth clean.
- Clean between your teeth with dental floss, pre-threaded flossers, a water flosser, or a similar product. This removes plaque and leftover food that a toothbrush can't reach.
- Rinse after you floss.

Hopefully, that refresher course will enable everyone to step up their teeth brushing, because poor dental health can lead to or exacerbate other medical problems.

People with chronic diseases often are more likely to develop gum disease, which also is known as periodontal disease. Chronic diseases affecting gums may include arthritis, diabetes, heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

More serious problems include oral cancer, including several types of cancers of the mouth. The median age for a diagnosis of oral or pharyngeal cancer is 62 years.

As people age, certain things change that can affect oral health, according to the University of Illinois, Chicago College of Dentistry. These may include a

loss of taste or a change in the way foods used to taste or feel in your mouth, dry mouth and an increase in cavities. Chewing and swallowing may begin to take more effort, or your teeth may become more sensitive.

According to the Chicago College of Dentistry, as people age, their tongues lose some ability. This could make it more difficult to chew or move food around in the mouth. When this happens, people may tend to swallow their food before it has been completely chewed, which can cause digestion and respiratory problems.

While some people connect eating too much sugar and candy when young with tooth decay, there are other reasons. Dental plaque, which is a buildup of bacteria, also can cause dental problems. These plaque acids can eat away at a tooth's outer surface and create cavities. Even teeth that already have fillings can still get cavities as plaque builds up underneath a chipped filling, according to the Chicago College of Dentistry.

Dry mouth is caused by not having enough saliva. Saliva is necessary to keep away harmful germs that cause tooth decay and oral infections. Saliva contains minerals such as calcium and phosphate.

It is important to understand the effects of over-the-counter or prescribed medication as some can cause dry mouth.

For denture wearers (otherwise known as

false teeth), dry mouth tends to make dentures uncomfortable and end up not fitting properly. If dentures rub against gums, sore spots can occur. Bacteria that causes tooth decay can also stick to dentures.

The Chicago College of Dentistry suggests people clean their dentures daily with cleaners designed specifically for dentures rather than toothpaste for natural teeth or household cleaners. Those are abrasive and can damage dentures. Take your dentures out at least four hours every 24 hours for a healthy mouth and remove full or partial dentures at night.

Good oral health is important for good heart health, especially when it comes to older adults who are at a higher risk for heart disease. Studies have shown that periodontal disease increases the risk of heart disease. These diseases are linked as they are both related to inflammation or swelling of the gums and other tissues, created by bacteria in the mouth. Some studies connect bacteria found in periodontal diseases with strokes.

It is important to not let bacteria found in plaque irritate the gums and cause them to swell. If not treated properly, gums pull away from teeth and form pockets where food particles and more plaque gather. In advanced cases, gums are destroyed, leading to bone and ligament problems and the loss of teeth, according to the Chicago College of Dentistry.

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out of control. If you take antibiotics that kill normal bacteria in the mouth, the candida fungus may multiply.

Stress also can cause thrush as can taking steroids. Also, having HIV and AIDS can be a factor.

While the infection doesn't spread from person to person, the candida fungus can be transmitted to others through saliva. Kissing someone who has thrush can cause the fungus to enter your mouth, but you still may not get thrush.

Signs of thrush include:

- White or red patches inside your mouth, on your tongue and on the back of your throat
- Raised spots that look like cottage cheese
- Cracking and redness at the corners of your mouth (angular cheilitis)
- A cottony feeling in your mouth
- Loss of taste

Sometimes thrush may also cause:

- Redness, irritation and pain under your dentures (denture stomatitis)
- A large red, painless mark in the center of your tongue (median rhomboid glossitis)
- A band of gum irritation or inflammation (linear gingival erythema)

Usually, the raised spots don't cause much discomfort unless they are scraped and then bleed.

A doctor often can diagnose thrush by looking into your mouth. The doctor might take a scrape of a lesion

to send to a lab for confirmation, according to WebMD.

Fortunately, it is usually easily treatable with antifungal medications taken for between one to two weeks. WebMD also suggests trying these home remedies:

- Rinse your mouth with 1/2 teaspoon of salt dissolved in a cup of warm water.
- Gargle 1/2 teaspoon of baking soda dissolved in a cup of warm water.
- Try foods and beverages with "good bacteria" (probiotics), like yogurt, kombucha or kefir, to restore the balance of yeast in your mouth.
- Rinse with 1 teaspoon of apple cider vinegar mixed with a cup of water, then spit out.
- If you wear dentures, disinfect them as your dentist recommends.

According to the NIH, researchers found that men with gum disease were 49% more likely to develop kidney cancer, 54% more likely to develop pancreatic cancer and 30% more likely to develop blood cancers.

The National Institutes of Health offers suggestions on how to lower your risk. Do not use tobacco products, including cigarettes, chewing tobacco, snuff, pipes or cigars. The long-term effects of using electronic cigarettes are still being studied, but e-cigarette vapor contains cancer-causing chemicals, according to the NIH.

Other suggestions include drinking alcohol in

moderation and applying lip balm with sunscreen when outdoors.

Other diseases have been linked with poor oral health, according to the American Academy of Periodontology. While studies have not proven conclusively that periodontal disease worsens the progression of other diseases, research has shown it contributes to the progression.

People with diabetes are more likely to have periodontal disease than people who do not have diabetes, according to the American Academy of Periodontology. This is most likely because people with diabetes are more susceptible to contracting infections. Also, gum disease can make it harder for people who have diabetes to control their blood sugar, thereby increasing their risk of complications. Studies also have shown that periodontal disease can increase the risk of heart disease. Once again, inflammation may be the culprit. Patients with existing heart disease who need dental procedures should talk to their cardiologist and periodontist to determine if you should take an antibiotic before any dental procedures.

Bacteria associated with periodontal disease can also contribute to respiratory diseases, including pneumonia, according to the NIH. Gum disease bacteria may travel to the brain and contribute to the development of dementia.

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Dental Insurance

Although it is important to visit a dentist regularly, some people do not for fear of the cost. Without insurance, dental care can be very expensive, and Medicare does not cover routine care. Some states limit Medicaid dental coverage.

Medicare is a federal health insurance program for people 65 and older and for those under 65 with certain disabilities. It only covers dental services related to specific medical conditions or treatments. It does not cover dentures or most routine care like checkups, cleanings or fillings.

Medicaid is a state-run program that provides medical benefits — and in some cases dental benefits — to eligible individuals and families. Most states provide limited dental services for adults, while some offer comprehensive services. Be sure and check what your state offers.

Lack of funds should not keep patients out of the dental chair. Some dental schools offer clinics for students to get experience treating patients. Costs are minimal, and a dentist still can supervise the student.

For a list of dental schools, visit the American Dental Association website at ada.org/267.aspx.

Some dental hygiene schools also offer supervised, low-cost care. To locate these schools, go to the American Dental Hygienists' Association website at adha.org/dental-hygiene-programs.

Contact your county or state health departments for a list of dental clinics that charge based on a patient's income.

But going to the dentist isn't enough. Eating healthy foods also is important. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products and lean proteins like turkey, chicken and fish together make a healthy diet.

The American Dental Association suggests people limit the amount of processed food and sugary beverages. It also urges people to stay away from foods that can damage their teeth, including hard candies and ice.

Hard candies come with the double whammy of containing lots of sugar and being capable of breaking or chipping a tooth. Try sugarless gum instead.

Ice is for chilling, not chewing, according to the ADA. Sure, water can't hurt your teeth. There is neither sugar nor additives. But chewing hard substances can result in a dental emergency and damaged enamel. Swallow water in liquid form rather than chewing it.

The ADA also suggests people limit exposure to acidic foods, which erode enamel and make teeth more susceptible to decay. Citric fruits and juices, like limes and lemons, also can irritate mouth sores.

In terms of coffee, some years it's good for you and then a new study comes debunking that. As far as dental issues are concerned, coffee and tea are fine except when the drinker heaps spoonfuls of sugar into their cup. Also, caffeinated coffee and tea can dry out mouths and stain teeth.

Beware of sticky foods and ones that go crunch. Dried fruit may taste great for a quick snack, but this sticky food tends to remain on teeth longer than other types of food and eventually damage them. Drink a glass of water after enjoying dried fruits or trail mixes.

Potato chips are a quick and tasty snack, but they are filled with starch which tends to get trapped in teeth. Once again, take a tall glass of water after eating handfuls of chips. Also, floss to remove the day's food particles and avoid plaque buildup.

As for drinking, limit the intake of sugary drinks and alcohol. Soda and sugary foods produce acids that attack tooth enamel. Carbonated soda, even if it's diet soda, is acidic. Sports and energy drinks may sound healthy but usually contain lots of sugar. Check the label to see how much sugar is included.

Beer and wine contain acid that will slowly dissolve tooth enamel. And sugar is an ingredient in many cocktails.

Bottom line, when thirsty, drink water.

A healthy diet may be hard to handle if you are missing teeth or your dentures don't fit properly. Make sure to keep up with regular dental checkups and have these issues fixed.

Many medications can affect the taste of foods, your food preferences and your appetite. Be sure to report any changes in your eating habits to your physician,

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dentist or dental hygienist.

Let the dentist know what medicines you are taking. A dry mouth, which can lead to cavities, often is the result of taking medications, including drugs for allergies, asthma, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, pain, anxiety, depression and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases.

Here are remedies to try to relieve dry mouth symptoms that are recommended by the ADA:

- Use over-the-counter oral moisturizers, such as a spray or mouthwash.
- Consult with your physician on whether to change your medication or dosage.
- Drink more water. Carry a water bottle with you, and don't wait until you're thirsty to drink. Your mouth needs constant lubrication.
- Use sugar-free gum or lozenges to stimulate saliva production.
- Get a humidifier to help keep moisture in the air.
- Avoid foods and beverages that irritate dry mouths, like coffee, alcohol, carbonated soft drinks and acidic fruit juices.
- Your dentist may apply a fluoride gel or varnish to protect your teeth from cavities.

If you are a caregiver, pass all this information on. Remind your loved one or friend to brush and floss daily and visit the dentist regularly. Pay attention. If the person you are assisting is eating less, it could be because he or she has mouth pain or other issues. There are dentists who specialize in treating older or disabled adults.

Hopefully, readers of this Senior Resources Guide will be more vigilant and not take their mouth full of teeth for granted. Brush regularly and don't skip dental checkups. Try and keep that winning smile going for years to come. ■

This guide was written by Suzanne Pollak, senior editor/writer at the Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington. Learn more about JCA at accessJCA.org or call us at 301-255-4200. Follow us on Facebook at [facebook.com/AccessJCA](https://www.facebook.com/AccessJCA) or X/Twitter at twitter.com/AccessJCA.



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