

# Oral health concerns for older adults



**A**s people age, oral health needs can change as well. Here are some things to think about:

- **Decreased Sensitivity.** You may begin to experience less pain or discomfort in your mouth, but this may not mean that your mouth is healthy. In some older adults, nerve changes may lessen sensitivity.

- **How to help.** See your dentist regularly, as your dentist can check for signs of tooth decay, gum disease, poorly fitting dentures, and oral cancer.

- **Dry Mouth.** A number of factors can cause dry mouth, including many medications. This can be detrimental, as saliva helps you eat and talk. It washes food away from the teeth and lessens the effect of acids in the mouth that can cause tooth decay. Saliva also carries minerals that keep teeth strong.

- **How to help.** To combat the effects of dry mouth, take small sips of water throughout the day. You can also suck on sugar-free lozenges or chew sugar-free gum. Avoid alcohol and tobacco. A saliva substitute may also help.

- **Gum Problems.** Anyone can develop gum disease. Caused by a build-up of plaque, gum disease affects the attachment between your teeth and gums. Left untreated, gum disease may result in tooth loss. Older adults may also experience receding gums, which exposes the roots. Teeth with exposed roots may be at increased risk of developing decay or becoming loose.

- **How to help.** Brush your teeth twice a day with a soft toothbrush along the gum line using a fluoride-containing toothpaste. Clean between your teeth with floss or another tool designed for this task once a day. See your dentist regularly, because plaque can harden along the gum line, making it difficult to keep your teeth clean on your own. A professional cleaning is the only way to remove hardened plaque.

- **Tooth Decay (Cavities).** Several factors can increase your risk of experiencing tooth decay: sugars in food and drinks, dry mouth, not cleaning your teeth every day, and exposed tooth roots. Even teeth with fillings or crowns can develop cavities.

- **How to help.** Luckily, the things you do to help prevent gum problems are the same things that can help you avoid cavities. Brush your teeth twice a day with a soft toothbrush along the gum line using a fluoride-containing toothpaste, and clean between your teeth once a day. See your dentist regularly. Your dentist may suggest that you also use a fluoride-containing mouthrinse or an in-office fluoride treatment or varnish.

## BOX

### Daily care.

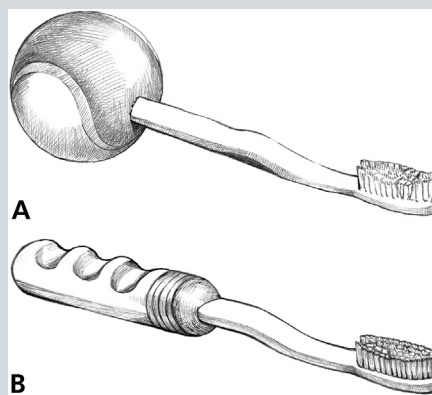
Spend some time each day taking care of your teeth.

- **Brush** your teeth twice a day with a soft toothbrush using a fluoride-containing toothpaste. If you have trouble using a toothbrush, try an electric or battery-operated toothbrush or one of the tricks shown in the figure to make a regular toothbrush easier to hold on to.

- **Clean between your teeth** once a day. You can use prethreaded flossers, tiny brushes made for cleaning between your teeth, a water flosser, regular floss, or wooden plaque removers.

- **If you wear dentures, take them out** before going to bed. Ask your dentist how to care for them.

- **Drink water with fluoride.** Many towns have fluoride in the tap water. Some bottled waters have fluoride too; check the label to be sure.



**Figure.** Cut a slit in a tennis ball and insert the handle (A), or buy a toothbrush with a large handle, then insert the toothbrush handle into a hand grip made for a bicycle (B). *Courtesy of National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, National Institutes of Health (Dental care everyday: a caregiver's guide. Available at: <http://www.nidcr.nih.gov/OralHealth/Topics/DevelopmentalDisabilities/DentalCareEveryDay.htm>. Accessed November 9, 2015).*

- **Tooth Loss.** Tooth loss can affect what you eat and how you look, talk, and feel.

- **How to help.** You may be able to restore your smile with implants or a partial or full denture. No matter how many teeth you have (even if you have lost them all), see your dentist regularly. Your dentist can check that all is well in your mouth, checking for things like sores, irritation, infection, and oral cancer. ■

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