

## **Getting older? Why your teeth and gums are important for good health**

One good thing about growing older in the 21st century is that we're more likely to keep our natural teeth as we age. Twenty years ago most people in Australia aged 65 or over had no natural teeth. But, thanks to better dental care, more of us are keeping our teeth, and experts predict that by 2019 only 20 per cent of elderly people will have lost their teeth.

Keeping our teeth into old age is an advantage because it makes it easier to chew fresh fruit and vegetables - foods which contain important nutrients and fibre that help prevent many diseases. When older people who have difficulty chewing eat only soft, processed foods, their health may suffer as a result.

Like the rest of the body, the mouth changes with age - but understanding these changes makes it easier to maintain a healthy mouth and teeth.

### **Why does my mouth feel dry?**

Although this is partly because we produce less saliva as we age, a dry mouth is often a side effect of medication - your doctor or pharmacist can tell you if your medication may be a cause. If your mouth feels dry, do something about it - your mouth needs saliva to wash away food debris and help prevent tooth decay. A dentist or pharmacist can recommend an oral moisturising gel (available from chemists). Mouthwashes can help keep the mouth moist too, and sugarless chewing gum can stimulate more saliva. It's also good (for general health as well as your mouth) to drink plenty of water each day even if you don't feel thirsty.

### **Is tooth decay a problem with age?**

Ageing can contribute to decay for two reasons. One is that gums tend to recede, exposing the roots of teeth to plaque - the sticky substance that forms on teeth and causes decay. These roots are more vulnerable to decay than the rest of the tooth. Another problem is that fillings in teeth weaken with time, allowing bacteria to creep in and cause decay.

### **How can I prevent problems with teeth and gums?**

By brushing teeth carefully twice a day, using fluoride toothpaste to help prevent decay. Clean the back surfaces of the teeth as well as the front, and clean between the teeth with dental tape or floss. If you have a bridge in your mouth (a device which attaches artificial teeth to natural teeth), clean and floss the natural teeth supporting the bridge very carefully. You can also protect teeth by avoiding sugary snacks and sweet soft drinks between meals. If you like sweet drinks and foods, have them at meal times only - between meals, drink water and eat healthy snacks which aren't sugary or sticky.

### **When should I see a dentist?**

Don't wait for things to go wrong - see a dentist for regular check ups. This makes it easier to spot early signs of tooth decay, as well as gum disease which can lead to tooth loss. See a dentist if you have symptoms of gum disease such as bleeding or inflamed gums, persistent bad breath or a change in the appearance of the gums. Because oral cancer is more common in people over 45, see a doctor or dentist about any persistent mouth ulcers or lumps.

### **What if I have dentures?**

Caring for dentures is as important as caring for natural teeth. Clean all denture surfaces daily - you can use dishwashing soaps or detergents applied with a brush. Store dentures in water when you're not using them - add antibacterial denture tablets to the water if you like, but they're no substitute for daily cleaning. Don't put up with any discomfort with dentures - always have them checked.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

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