

Aging and Oral Health

The aging population in the United States is growing. Older individuals should know that maintaining good oral health is vital to having a healthy smile and optimal overall health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), oral pain, difficulty eating (due to missing teeth, ill-fitting dentures, cavities, and gum disease), and tooth loss are all signs of oral health problems in aging adults. In addition, the risk of developing oral cancer increases with age.

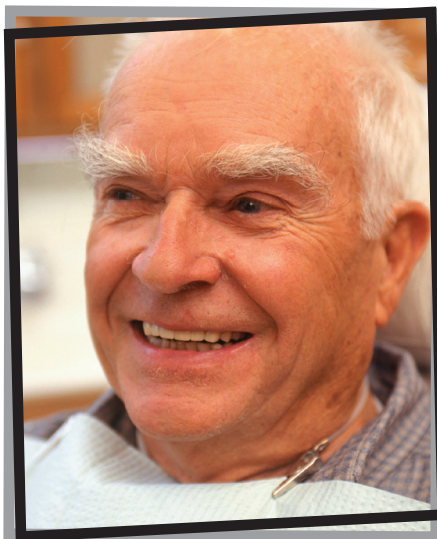
What are the signs of oral cancer?

Oral cancer is the sixth most common cancer and can form in any part of the mouth or throat. If not diagnosed and treated in its early stages, oral cancer can spread, leading to chronic pain, loss of function, irreparable facial and oral disfigurement after surgery, and death.

Oral cancer typically is painless in its early stages but can become painful as it spreads. Go to your dentist immediately if you observe any of the following: changes in the way your teeth fit together; oral sores that bleed easily or don't heal; lumps, thickening, rough spots, or crusty or eroded areas in your mouth; or difficulty swallowing, chewing, speaking, or moving your jaw or tongue. Your dentist should perform a head and neck exam to screen for oral cancer during your routine checkups.

What oral conditions am I more prone to as I age?

- **Dental caries.** Dental caries (tooth decay) is one of the main causes of tooth loss, or edentulism. About 23 million people are completely edentulous, according to the American College of Prosthodontists.



- **Periodontal disease.** Periodontal disease, better known as gum disease, is a chronic bacterial infection that affects the gums and bone supporting your teeth. According to the CDC, in 2012, one out of every two American adults age 30 and older have had periodontal disease, which can lead to tooth loss.
- **Xerostomia (dry mouth).** When the salivary glands do not work properly, the amount of saliva in the mouth decreases, resulting in dry mouth — which can lead to decay. Prescription and over-the-counter medications are the most common cause of dry mouth. There are more than 400 medications that can contribute to mouth dryness, including antihypertensives, antidepressants, painkillers, tranquilizers, diuretics, and antihistamines. Dry mouth also can be caused by radiation therapy and chemotherapy, hormonal alterations, or diseases such as diabetes, lupus, Alzheimer's disease, and kidney disease. Dry mouth can make it difficult to eat,

swallow, taste, and speak. Drinking water and avoiding sweets, tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine are some ways to fight this condition. Your dentist also can prescribe medications to ease the symptoms of severe dry mouth.

How can I maintain my oral health as I age?

- Avoid tobacco — a risk factor for periodontal disease and oral cancer — and limit alcohol, also an oral cancer risk factor.
- Drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste to protect against decay.
- Practice good oral hygiene. Brushing your teeth with a soft-bristled brush and flossing between teeth can help remove plaque. If you wear dentures, brush them every day to remove food particles and plaque and to prevent staining. Before inserting your dentures, brush your gums, tongue, and the roof of your mouth with a soft-bristled brush to stimulate tissue circulation and remove plaque.
- See your dentist at least twice a year. People who do not have teeth still need to visit the dentist regularly, since denture adjustments and oral cancer screenings are part of routine dental visits. Older patients who are planning to enter a nursing home should ask about on-site dental care.

What if arthritis makes brushing my teeth difficult?

If you have arthritis and brushing your teeth is painful for you, you can try securing your toothbrush to a wider object, such as a ruler. Some dental products, such as electric toothbrushes, are designed to make dental care less painful. Talk to your dentist for other suggestions.