

TAKE CARE OF YOUR TEETH

Surveys show that ninety percent of adults have an average of 23.5 teeth. Almost a third of adults have all 28 teeth and fifty percent age 55 and older wear partial or complete dentures. Whether caring for original teeth or dentures, older adults face a range of special oral concerns, including root decay and periodontal disease. You can keep your smile healthy with proper care and making regular visits to your dentist's office.

In addition to the cavities you have been warned about since you were a child, there are two types of decay that may accompany getting older. Root decay is caused by a receding gum line and too much root surface exposed. Tooth decay may be caused by the weakening or chipping of older fillings. Both of these conditions may cause intense pain and may result in the loss of the affected tooth. Daily brushing and flossing may help protect your smile from these two common problems with older teeth.

Nearly seventy-five percent of older adults suffer from some sort of periodontal disease - more commonly known as gum disease. Signs of gum disease include red, swollen gums, pain when chewing, bleeding when flossing or brushing and/or a change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite. Gum disease and its associated bacteria may contribute to some forms of oral cancer, heart disease and respiratory ailments, among others. Gum disease may be completely reversible if caught in time.

For those that wear dentures or partials, dental hygiene is also a major consideration. Dentures should be brushed daily with a soft toothbrush or denture cleaning brush, using a denture powder or paste, hand soap or baking soda. Dentures should be brushed inside and outside and rinsed with cool water. Remaining natural teeth and gums, especially those teeth supporting a partial denture, should also be brushed. When not in use, dentures should be covered with water or a denture cleaning solution to prevent drying.

In addition to brushing, flossing and regular check-ups, many foods may help build strong, healthy teeth and gums. Dairy products provide calcium and vitamin D for strengthening teeth and bones. Breads and cereals supply B vitamins for growth and iron for healthy blood, which in turn contributes to healthy gums tissue. Fruits and vegetables containing vitamin C are essential to maintaining healthy gums. Lean meat, fish, poultry and beans provide iron and protein for overall good health, and magnesium and zinc for teeth and bones.

The American Dental Association recommends brushing your teeth twice per day and flossing at least once per day. Decay-causing bacteria still lingers between teeth where toothbrush bristles can't reach. Flossing removes plaque and food particles from between the teeth and under the gum line. You should also replace your toothbrush every three months.

Many older adults complain that they are not able to use their toothbrush or dental floss. If you have arthritis or limited use of your hands, try adapting the toothbrush for easy use. Insert the handle into a rubber ball or hair curler; or glue the toothbrush handle into a bicycle grip. Toothbrush handles can be lengthened with a piece of wood or plastic such as a ruler or a tongue depressor. For people who have dexterity problems and cannot use a manual toothbrush, an electric toothbrush may be easier to use. Dental floss holders are also available.

For more information on making your home and things in your home more user friendly,

contact Texas Cooperative Extension at <http://fcs.tamu.edu/housing/ah/access.htm> . You may also find information on dental health from the American Dental Association's website at www.ada.org .

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