

## Oral Longevity

### **A Healthy mouth for Life**

If you want to feel good, stay healthy and look great throughout life, you might be surprised what a difference a healthy mouth makes. By adopting healthy habits at home, making better choices about diet and lifestyle and seeking regular professional dental care, many older adults are keeping their teeth, staying healthier and looking better than ever.

### **Why your teeth are important**

Your teeth are important for speaking, chewing, digestion, smiling and appearance. And, your teeth are never too old to be repaired or replaced. If you don't maintain your natural teeth or replace teeth that are lost, your overall health can suffer. If you've lost some or all of your natural teeth, your dentist can make removable dentures, but they aren't the only way to replace missing teeth anymore. Dental implants are a new option that many older adults are choosing. Maintaining well-fitting dentures, partial dentures, bridges or implants will help you eat right, feel better, and look great.

### **The Mouth/Body Connection**

There is a connection between a healthy mouth and a healthy body. Bleeding gums, visible root surfaces and loose teeth are not normal at any age. These are usually signs of an infection called periodontal (gum) disease. Increasing medical evidence suggests that an unhealthy mouth may worsen serious medical problems, like heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Simply said, we know that oral health is important for overall health and vice versa.

Periodontal disease is caused by the bacteria in dental plaque, which if not removed through daily tooth brushing and flossing, results in red or swollen gums that bleed easily. If plaque remains on teeth too long, a hard deposit called tartar or calculus forms. This deposit is removed by your dental hygienist or dentist when your teeth are professionally cleaned. Left untreated, periodontal disease can destroy the gum tissues and bone around your teeth and eventually teeth can be lost. Periodontal infections can be serious and can affect not only the mouth, but potentially your overall health.

### **Taking Care of Your Teeth**

Brushing and flossing your teeth is just as important now as it was when you were younger. Making the choice to practice good oral hygiene at home every day will make a big difference in how you look and feel.

Brush your teeth twice a day with an ADA-accepted fluoride toothpaste. Choose a toothbrush with soft bristles. Harder bristles can wear away your enamel and damage your teeth and gums. If you have limited ability to move your shoulders, arms and hands you might benefit from using an electric toothbrush. The handle is larger, which makes it

easier to hold, and the powered brush does a lot of the fine movement needed to assist with cleaning your teeth.

Clean between teeth daily with floss or another inter-dental cleaner. Floss holders are designed to make it easier to use floss between your teeth. Special inter-dental cleaners, such as picks, brushes or sticks may also work effectively for you.

Talk to your dentist about what types of oral care products will be most effective for you. The ADA Seal on a product is your assurance that it has met ADA criteria for safety and effectiveness. Look for the ADA Seal on oral hygiene products including fluoride and desensitizing toothpastes, toothbrushes, floss, inter-dental cleaners, oral irrigators and mouth rinses.

Replace your toothbrush every three or four months or sooner, if the bristles become frayed. A worn toothbrush will not do a good job of cleaning your teeth.

Bacteria stick to your teeth and also to full or partial dentures. If you wear dentures, cleaning them on a daily basis is very important.

Generally, dentists say to take your dentures out of your mouth for at least four hours every day. It's best to remove your full or partial dentures at night. To stay healthy, the lining of your mouth needs to rejuvenate after prolonged contact with dentures. Your own dentist will provide you with instructions about how long your dentures may be worn each day.

Denture cleaning products like denture cleansers and overnight soaking solutions help keep dentures fresh and clean.

### **Making Smart choices**

Making wise food and beverage choices is good for your entire body as well as for maintaining healthy teeth and gums.

Drink water. Consuming optimally fluoridated water throughout life helps prevent tooth decay no matter how old you are. If you choose bottled water, check the label for the fluoride content. Or, contact the company if the fluoride content is not shown on the label and ask what level of fluoride the water contains. Talk to your dentist about what's best for you.

If you are a smoker, the sooner you make the choice to quit smoking the better. Smoking increases problems with gum disease, tooth decay and tooth loss, affects healing after dental procedures and retention of dental implants. There are tobacco cessation programs, over-the-counter products and prescription medications that your dentist may prescribe or recommend that can help you quit

## **Visiting the dentist**

Visit your dentist regularly for a complete dental checkup that includes an oral cancer exam. This is equally important for people who wear complete dentures. Oral cancer doesn't care whether or not you have natural teeth.

Oral cancer is more common than you may think, and older adults may be at a greater risk. As with other cancers, early detection saves lives. And dentists are the most skilled at detecting oral cancer early as part of every routine checkup. Open sores, white or reddish patches, and other changes in the lips, tongue and lining of the mouth may be signs of oral cancer or other potentially serious diseases. You should contact your dentist if any of these conditions last 14 days or longer.

Your dentist can also evaluate any problems that your medications may create for your mouth. Saliva is one of our most precious natural resources for good oral health throughout life. Dry mouth is often an unwanted side effect of many important and life-saving drugs that are commonly taken by older adults. Common medications that cause dry mouth are:

- High blood pressure medications, such as water pills
- Cholesterol lowering drugs
- Pain medications, sedatives and muscle relaxants
- Anxiety, depression and most other psychiatric medications
- Allergy and asthma medications seizure medications
- Medications for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases

If you have dry mouth, talk to your dentist about ways to reduce the symptoms and maintain good oral health, for example, using an over the counter mouthwash or spray that can help moisten your mouth.

Bring these to your dental checkup:

- An up-to-date list of your medications including vitamin supplements
- An up-to-date list of your medical conditions and allergies
- Information about your health care providers, including all of your doctors and their phone numbers and your previous dentist (if applicable)
- Information about your emergency contacts
- Your dental insurance or Medicaid cards
- Your dentures or partials, even if you don't wear them