

Oral Health and You

What Is Oral Health?

Oral health is not only about keeping teeth clean. It also refers to the jaw, lips, gums, teeth, tongue, and glands that make saliva. Good oral health is important to your overall health. Many health problems, like diabetes, heart disease, and other conditions, are linked with oral health. It's important to talk to both your dentist and primary health care professional (physician, nurse practitioner, physician assistant) about oral health.

What Are Some Common Oral Health Problems?

- A **Cavity** is a hole in your tooth caused by bacteria from plaque buildup. Eating sugary foods and drinks can make plaque worse. When plaque is not cleaned off the teeth, cavities can form.
- **Gingivitis** happens when plaque stays on your teeth for too long. Gingivitis can cause gums to be swollen and tender and bleed more easily. It can also cause bad breath. This is the beginning stage of gum disease.
- **Gum Disease (Periodontitis)** occurs when tartar builds up and contributes to infections deep in your gums. It can lead to loss of tissue, bone, and teeth and can increase your risk for other serious problems, like diabetes, heart attack, or stroke.
- **Dry Mouth** can be caused by medicines for high blood pressure, depression, or other health problems.

What Are the Warning Signs of Poor Oral Health?

- Red, swollen, tender, or bleeding gums
- Bad breath that won't go away
- Loose teeth
- Sensitive or sore teeth
- Receding gums (gums that pull away from the teeth)
- Dry mouth
- Long-lasting mouth sores



How Are Oral Health Problems Diagnosed?

Most oral health problems are diagnosed after your mouth, teeth, gums, and tongue are examined. Your dentist may also use X-rays to help diagnose oral health problems.

How Are Oral Health Problems Treated?

- **Cavities** can be treated by filling or covering the holes in teeth. If a cavity or tooth decay is more serious, nerves in the tooth or the entire tooth may need to be removed.
- **Gingivitis** can be treated by a professional cleaning at your dentist's office. Good oral hygiene will keep plaque and tartar from building up again.
- **Gum disease** is treated by removing tartar and bacteria from your teeth and gums. If gum disease is more serious, you may need prescription antibiotic medicines or dental surgery.



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How Do I Keep My Teeth and Gums Healthy?

- Brush your teeth twice daily using toothpaste with fluoride
- Floss once a day
- Avoid tobacco, including chewing tobacco
- Limit alcohol use
- Eat healthy foods and avoid sugary snacks
- Get regular cleanings at a dentist’s office
- Avoid acidic beverages, like cola
- Discuss any medicines you are taking with both your dentist and primary health care professional

What Can I Expect at My Dentist Appointment?

Dentists work together with dental hygienists and other health professionals. The hygienist will examine your mouth, clean and polish your teeth, and talk to you about practicing

good oral health. X-rays of your jaw and teeth may be taken. Your dentist will also examine your mouth and talk with you about any concerns you may have. If you have any oral health problems, you may need other testing or procedures.

Questions for My Primary Health Care Professional

- Will you examine my mouth at my primary health visits?
- You’re not a dentist—why is it important for you to examine my mouth?
- How do I know if I am brushing and flossing correctly?
- Am I at risk for any oral health problems?
- How often should I visit the dentist?
- What conditions put me at greater risk for oral health problems?
- What medicines might cause me to have dry mouth?

For More Information

- **American Dental Association:** www.mouthhealthy.org/en/adults-over-60/healthy-habits
- **Medline Plus:** www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/dentalhealth.html

Notes:
