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Oral Health for Older Adults: Quick Tips

Taking care of your teeth and gums as you get older can prevent problems like toothaches, tooth decay (cavities), and tooth loss. A healthy mouth also makes it easier for you to eat well and enjoy food.

It's especially important to take care of your teeth and gums if you have a health condition like diabetes or heart disease — or if you're taking medicines that can cause oral health problems.

Follow the steps below to keep your teeth and gums healthy as you get older.

Brush and floss your teeth every day.

Brushing and flossing helps remove dental plaque, a sticky film of bacteria (germs). If plaque builds up on your teeth, it can cause tooth decay or gum disease.

- Brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste twice a day — brush after breakfast and before bed
- Floss between your teeth every day — if you have trouble flossing, ask your dentist about using a special brush or pick instead

Watch for changes in your mouth.

Your risk of getting oral cancer increases as you get older. If you see any changes in your mouth, it's important to get them checked out.

See a doctor or dentist if you have any of these symptoms for more than 2 weeks:

- A spot in your mouth, lip, or throat that feels uncomfortable or sore
- A lump or thick area in your mouth, lip, or throat
- A white or red patch in your mouth
- Trouble chewing, swallowing, or moving your jaw or tongue
- Numbness in your tongue or mouth

- Swelling in your jaw
- Pain in 1 ear without hearing loss

See your dentist regularly for a checkup and cleaning.

There's no single rule for how often people need to see the dentist — it varies from person to person. The next time you get a checkup and cleaning, ask your dentist how often you need to come in.

Keep in mind that Medicare doesn't cover most dental care, so you may want to get private dental insurance. Get help finding low-cost dental care [This link is external to health.gov.](#)

Talk to your doctor about dry mouth.

Dry mouth means not having enough saliva (spit) to keep your mouth wet. Dry mouth can make it hard to eat, swallow, or talk. It can also lead to tooth decay or infection.

Dry mouth is a side effect of some medicines. It can also happen if you have certain health problems (like diabetes) or if you're getting chemotherapy or radiation (treatments for cancer).

If you have dry mouth, talk with your doctor or dentist and ask what you can do.

Build healthy habits.

- Eat healthy and cut down on sugary foods and drinks. This can help prevent tooth decay — and it's good for your overall health.
- Don't smoke or use other tobacco products. Smoking cigarettes, chewing tobacco, or using snuff puts you at higher risk for oral cancer. Smoking also increases your risk for gum disease.
- If you smoke, make a plan to quit. If you're not sure where to start, call 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669) for free help.
- If you drink alcohol, drink only in moderation — that means 1 drink or less in a day for women and 2 drinks or less in a day for men. Heavy drinking increases your risk of oral cancer.

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