



## Aging can negatively impact oral health



When was the last time you went to your dentist? How often do you brush your teeth? Have you ever lost any of your teeth or had a tooth ache right before a special occasion? Maybe you thought, "I should have gone to the dentist last week." For some reason, it is easier for most people to postpone going to the dentist than most other doctor appointments. Why is that? Perhaps they think that mouth-related

problems are simply annoying rather than harmful.

However, it is important for everyone, especially as we age, to take care of our teeth and visit the dentist on a regular basis. Prevention is key. Doing so will help your teeth last a long time, will benefit your overall health, and hopefully make you want to smile!

### Plaque

Aging is not an excuse to neglect taking care of your mouth and continuing to do so now will perhaps prevent problems and save you money down the road. More and more adults are keeping their natural teeth as a result of prevention. Plaque is a bacteria that sticks to teeth and builds up, leading to tooth decay and gum disease. Easy ways to help control plaque include:

- Brushing twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste (check to make sure that it has the ADA Seal of Acceptance)
- Cleaning between teeth everyday with floss or an inter-dental cleaner.
- Visiting a dentist to get a professional cleaning

### Periodontitis (Gum Disease)

Why is gum disease (periodontitis) a big deal? It is common in older adults since it advances gradually and may not be painful. Not only can it cause tooth loss but it has also been found to be associated with cardiovascular disease, stroke, and bacterial pneumonia! While it is not known if one causes the other, it is still important to try to avoid it. The American Dental Association website ([www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)) advises that you seek medical attention immediately when or if you notice any of the following:

- Bleeding gums when you brush
- Red, tender or swollen gums
- Gums that have pulled away from the teeth
- Pus between your teeth and gums when the gums are pressed
- Loose teeth or teeth that are moving apart; any change in your bite
- Any change in the fit of your partial dentures

- Constant bad breath or bad taste

The longer that periodontitis goes untreated, the more time it has to cause damage to your body! Still not convinced? If caught early enough, it can be reversed but advanced cases may need surgery.

### Dry Mouth

Do you have dry mouth? You aren't alone, older adults commonly have reduced saliva flow. This may be because of certain medical disorders or side effects of medications. According to the American Dental Association website ([www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)), these medications often include:

- High blood pressure medications
- Cholesterol lowering drugs
- Pain medications, sedatives, and muscle relaxants
- Anxiety, depression, and other psychiatric medications
- Allergy and asthma medications
- Seizure medications
- Medications for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases

You need enough saliva to keep your mouth lubricated, to wash away food, and neutralize acids that plaque produces to avoid cavities. You may find it helpful to keep sugar-free candy or gum handy or use artificial saliva and oral rinses. It is also important to drink fluoridated water in order to prevent cavities. The fluoride content can be checked on bottled water by looking at the label or contacting the company if the information is not listed. Staying hydrated is important for your overall health as well and this is especially important to pay attention to during the warmer months or during physical activity.

When was your last dental appointment? Take a break to check your calendar and make an appointment if needed. It is important to remember to have your teeth cleaned and checked at least every 6 months. Taking time to maintain the health of your teeth and gums brings you one step closer to living a "Healthier Tomorrow".

*This column was written by Rebecca Wright, Student Intern for the Center for Healthy Aging. For more information on this article, call 412-624-3217. The Center for Healthy Aging is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information contact David J. Fetterman, Community Outreach Coordinator at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412- 383-3121 or visit [www.healthyaging.pitt.edu](http://www.healthyaging.pitt.edu) .*