

# Seniors

## Oral Health for Seniors

### California Dental Association

MOVING FORWARD. TOGETHER.

**Q.** How does growing older affect oral health?

**A.** The aging process often creates subtle or dramatic changes in the condition of teeth, mouth and gums, including:

- **Keeping teeth clean and white:** The formation of plaque, a colorless layer of bacteria that builds up on teeth, accelerates as we grow older. In addition, older fillings may weaken and crack, allowing plaque to accumulate around the edges of fillings, making it harder to keep them clean and leading to increased decay. Also, teeth may darken in color due to changes that normally occur with aging.

*What your CDA member dentist can do:* Regular preventive visits to your CDA member dentist will help you keep your teeth clean and keep your fillings in good repair. Additionally, if you have healthy tooth structure, your CDA dentist may suggest bleaching as a method for restoring a whiter, more youthful appearance to your teeth.

- **Gum disease:** Bacteria found in plaque create toxins which irritate and inflame the gums and cause gum tissue to separate from teeth, creating pockets. Left untreated, gum disease may damage the bone that holds your teeth in place, resulting in unnecessary tooth loss. Poorly fitted dentures, poor oral hygiene, illnesses and some medications may increase the severity of gum disease, and create chewing problems and pain.

*What your CDA member dentist can do:* Regular dental visits can help control the progression of gum disease and reduce its damaging effects.

- **As you age:** Gums may begin to recede from teeth. This process exposes tooth roots to plaque, making them more sensitive to temperature and more vulnerable to decay.

*Your CDA member dentist can assist you* with preventive care that will help decrease the occurrence and severity of gum recession, as well as provide treatment for root sensitivity and restore decayed root surfaces.

- **Dry Mouth:** Dry mouth is caused by reduced saliva flow and may lead to tooth damage. Reduced saliva flow may result from a medical disorder or from a side effect of medications such as antihistamines, decongestants, heart medications or diuretics. The reduced flow affects teeth because saliva acts as a cleaning agent in the mouth to wash away and buffer acids produced by plaque. Saliva also contains minerals that continually bathe tooth surfaces and help keep them strong. When saliva flow is inadequate, teeth decay more easily.

*What your CDA member dentist can do:* Your CDA member dentist will help determine if “dry mouth” is affecting your oral health and can recommend the use of products and preventive protocols to counteract the effects of dry mouth.

**Q.** What can be done to keep my mouth healthy and help me maintain my lifestyle?

**A.** Visit your CDA member dentist regularly. Scheduling periodic check-ups is the best way to prevent and detect problems resulting from the aging process. CDA member dentists are trained to detect changes in the condition of gums and teeth as part of regular oral examinations. Early treatment of gum disease and cavities reduces the need – and the cost – for more extensive treatment that may be required if problems of the mouth, gums and teeth go untreated. Additionally:

- Good at-home care can help reduce the formation of plaque. However, even the best home care does not fully prevent the formation of tartar (hardened plaque) on your teeth. Regular dental visits are needed to keep teeth clean and optimize dental health.
- Daily use of fluoridated toothpastes and other products recommended by your CDA member dentist can strengthen tooth enamel and reduce tooth decay, especially around exposed roots.
- Implants, dentures and other tooth restorations are available options. By filling in gaps from lost teeth or by replacing diseased teeth, your CDA member dentist can help you maintain good chewing surfaces and bite alignments so that you can chew with ease, eat in comfort and smile with assurance.

- As part of the healthcare team, your dentist is able to diagnose diseases that require medical attention. CDA member dentists often can spot early signs of diabetes, oral cancer or adverse drug reactions and interactions during a regular dental exam. It is important to note that your medical condition may have an impact on how your CDA member dentist delivers dental care. Dental patients with heart conditions or high blood pressure may require pre-medication, or a change in their regular medication, before undergoing certain dental procedures. These conditions should be discussed with your CDA member dentist during your regular check-ups.

**Q.** Is good dental health worth the expense?

**A.** Yes. Recognize that there are costs involved in choosing not to take care of your teeth, mouth and gums. These can include discomfort or pain, limitations on foods that can be eaten resulting in the lowering of nutritional quality, and self-conscious smiling. Additionally, oral health is widely recognized as an important part of general health. Gum disease has been linked to a number of other health conditions, including heart disease and diabetes. A decision to maintain your oral health is also a decision to support your general health.

The good news is with the help of your CDA member dentist, a treatment plan can be designed to help you achieve a quality lifestyle at a reasonable cost. Your visits to the dental office are the building blocks of good oral and general health.