

AGEING AND ORAL HEALTH

Good oral health is important for the health and wellbeing of older people, particularly those with existing health conditions. As people get older, the need for dental care increases. Carers play an important role in helping older people maintain their oral health.

Problems with teeth, gums and dentures can affect overall wellbeing. Issues that can occur include:

- Pain and difficulty with eating, resulting in poor nutrition
- Poor appearance, which can lower self-esteem and lead to social isolation
- Poor oral health, which can compromise other health conditions, such as diabetes, and cardiovascular and respiratory disease.

Common conditions that can affect the mouth as a person ages

Dry mouth: A lack of saliva can be uncomfortable and it increases the risk of developing oral disease. It may lead to dentures rubbing or becoming loose, as well as difficulty in speaking and eating. Dry mouth can result from physical changes to the body as it ages. Taking multiple medications also increases the risk of dry mouth.

Tooth wear: Many years of chewing and grinding can wear down the teeth and lead to sensitivity or increased risk of decay. Extreme wear can even lead to infection and the need to extract teeth.

Gum disease: Inflammation of the gums due to plaque can affect the bone holding the teeth. The risk increases with age, smoking or unmanaged diabetes. Gum disease may cause loose or painful teeth, and eventually tooth loss.

Root decay: The roots of the teeth may become exposed as the gums shrink, especially if a person has gum disease. The roots of the teeth are more likely to get decay.

Other diseases of the mouth: This includes fungal infections, skin conditions or potentially malignant/malignant conditions. Oral fungal infections can cause sores at the corners of the mouth, saliva pooling and red or white patches inside the mouth.

Look out for any signs of these conditions if you're assisting an older person to clean their teeth.



How to maintain good oral health into older age

Have regular dental check-ups

Regular check-ups with your oral health practitioner will help to prevent and manage any issues early.

Increase remineralising products

These products are tooth protective and help prevent decay. Incorporate a higher strength fluoride toothpaste, fluoride mouth rinse or a product containing calcium-phosphate into the daily routine. Your oral health practitioner can recommend products that are suitable. Follow the instructions for use on the packaging or as directed by your oral health practitioner.

Avoid tobacco

Tobacco in any form has been linked to an increased risk of mouth and throat cancer, as well as heart disease and other serious conditions.

Increase saliva and hydration

Speak to a doctor about reviewing medications that cause dry mouth. If this is not possible, drink plenty of water and chew sugar-free gum. Limit alcohol and caffeine.

Reduce sugar

Sugar intake is directly linked to a person's risk of tooth decay. Try to reduce consumption of sugar, especially added sugar in tea or coffee, cakes and lollies.



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Arthritis and dementia are two common conditions that may occur with ageing and affect people's ability to care for their own teeth.



Arthritis

Inflammation and stiffness in the joints, such as the shoulder or wrist, can make brushing and flossing teeth a painful or difficult task. This can be reduced by:

- Using a flossing handle, which eliminates the need to hold thin floss around fingers
- Adapting toothbrush or flossing handles to make them easier to grip, such as adding a bicycle hand grip
- Using an electric toothbrush, which reduces the movement required in the wrist and has a thicker handle.

In more severe cases, a carer may need to assist with, or carry out, cleaning of teeth or dentures.



Dementia

Dementia can affect a person's daily activities, changing the types of foods they prefer and their ability to care for their teeth.

The level of assistance or care required at home varies depending on the severity or progression of dementia. If caring for someone with dementia, in addition to increasing remineralising products and hydration, and monitoring and reducing sugar, it may be helpful to:

Help with oral hygiene: Remind the person directly, create a daily reminder chart or assist them with their oral hygiene.

Look for changes: Look for changes inside the mouth or changes in behaviour, such as avoiding eating or holding the face. These can be signs of pain or discomfort.

Have a printed medical summary: It may not always be possible to go to appointments with an older friend or relative. Help them by typing and printing a list of medical conditions, allergies and medications.

For more information on ageing and oral health visit:

Australian Dental Association

www.ada.org.au/Your-Dental-Health/Older-Adults-65

Dental Health Services Victoria

www.dhsv.org.au/dental-advice/general-dental-advice/older-adults-and-carers

Alzheimer's Australia - Dental care

www.fightdementia.org.au/support-and-services/families-and-friends/personal-care/dental-care

For helpful questions to ask when researching residential aged care visit www.10questions.org.au