

Dental Care After Retirement



If you are about to retire or already are enjoying your golden years, good for you. A flexible schedule that includes more leisure time is one of the great incentives of retirement years.

But one thing that you shouldn't retire is your good oral health care routine. In fact, oral health should become a bit more of a priority for older people because some issues can become a greater problem as we age.

Special Needs

Community water fluoridation, fluoride toothpaste and an emphasis on preventive care over the past several decades have helped adults keep their natural teeth longer. Overall, this has been a great triumph for oral health but it also means that older adults may have more complex dental care considerations than previous generations. With increasing age comes the likelihood that you may have one or more chronic diseases and be taking medications to manage those diseases.¹ Therefore, it is especially important to inform your dental professional of any changes or updates in your medical history to ensure safe and effective treatment.²

In addition to partnering with dental professionals for care, older adults should be aware of the following issues that may affect their dental needs.

Prevent Periodontal Disease

Periodontal disease, or gum disease, is a major cause of tooth loss in adults, but it is preventable – and even reversible – in its early stages.² It often goes undetected, progressing slowly and painlessly over time. In addition, diabetes is a growing problem among older adults and people with diabetes may be more susceptible to developing periodontal disease.³ Careful oral hygiene and regular dental visits help control periodontal disease. Notify your dental professional if you see any of the following warning signs:

- Bleeding gums during brushing
- Gums that have pulled away from the teeth
- Loose teeth or teeth moving apart
- Change in bite or change in the fit of your partial dentures
- Constant bad breath or bad taste

Don't Ignore Dry Mouth

Some systemic diseases and hundreds of common medications can cause diminished saliva output, a condition called dry mouth.³ **Saliva is critical to maintaining good oral health, and dry mouth can lead to dental decay, denture sores and subsequent speech and eating difficulties that may impair nutrition and social interactions.** So, for good health as well as better quality of life, address dry mouth as soon as possible.

After your dental professional diagnoses dry mouth, he or she may order a low-sugar diet and topical fluoride or antimicrobial mouth rinse to help prevent tooth decay. Dry mouth can be very uncomfortable and artificial saliva, oral moisturizers, lubricants, and nighttime use of bedside humidifiers may also be recommended.

Staying hydrated as well as keeping a water bottle with you throughout the day for small sips to keep your mouth moist may also help. Chewing sugar-free gum, or sucking on hard candies or mints can help stimulate saliva.

Make sure to go sugar-free though or you could make tooth decay problems worse. Denture wearers who have dry mouth can develop a fungal infection called oral candidiasis or thrush. Your dentist can diagnose this problem and advise you on proper denture cleaning or medication if necessary.

Screen for Oral Cancer

Regular dental visits are essential, even for those who no longer have their natural teeth.⁴ Oral cancers usually appear later in life, particularly among smokers and heavy alcohol drinkers. Oral and throat cancer cases in the United States are estimated to exceed 40,000 people per year.⁵

Oral cancer may appear as white or red changes in the mouth that may be sore or painless. As with other cancers, early diagnosis is very important. The five-year survival rate for those with localized disease at diagnosis is 83 percent compared with only 32 percent for those whose cancer has spread to other parts of the body.⁵

Make sure you have at least an annual oral exam. See your dental professional sooner if you notice any persistent changes in your mouth or throat such as pain, swelling, numbness, difficulty eating or swallowing or sores including white or red lesions that last for more than three weeks. To help prevent oral cancer, avoid using any tobacco products and drink alcohol in moderation.

Arrange for Dental Care

Dental professionals recognize that good oral health is an important part of overall health.⁴ Make the most of your next dental exam by coming prepared with the following information and items:

- Your complete medical history with up-to-date information on your health (including any allergies, recent surgeries, illnesses or hospitalizations)
- Complete names, doses and frequencies of any medications you're taking (prescription or over-the-counter)

- Names and phone numbers of your current physician(s)
- Dental insurance or Medicaid cards
- Your dentures or partials
- Emergency contact information

Don't be afraid to ask your dentist questions or discuss any concerns you might have. Talk with your dental professional if you are anxious about the exam, or if reduced mobility or dexterity has hampered your daily dental hygiene routine. For example, arthritis sufferers may benefit from certain dental products such as battery-operated toothbrushes with large handles.

If you are planning to reside in a nursing home, find out if the nursing home staff is trained in basic mouth care, and if mouth care is emphasized at least once a day. Also ask if staff are trained to recognize oral problems or if on-call dental professionals are available. Family members should play an active role in encouraging the oral health of homebound adults or those in nursing homes by helping them schedule regular dental visits.

Keep Your Old Habits

The problems your dentist warned you about as a child should still concern you. Cavities and gum disease are things to watch for throughout your life. To protect against these lifelong concerns – and the new issues that may develop with age – keep up these good dental habits: ⁴

- Brush your teeth gently at least twice per day and floss at least daily.
- Drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste.
- Visit your dentist regularly.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Avoid tobacco.

For more information about oral health care and dental benefits, visit our website at www.deltadental.com and click on the Oral Health and Wellness section.

1 "Oral Health and the Aging Population." R.L. Ettinger. *Journal of the American Dental Association*. September 2007, vol. 138, no. suppl_1 pp. 5S-6S.

2 "Oral Health for Older Americans." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. November 24, 2006.

3 "Dry Mouth and Its Effects on the Oral Health of Elderly People." M.D. Turner and J.A. Ship. *Journal of the American Dental Association*. September 2007, vol. 138, no. suppl_1 pp. 15S-20S. http://jada.ada.org/cgi/content/full/138/suppl_1/15S, accessed 2010.

4 "Oral Longevity: A Healthy Mouth for Life." American Dental Association with GlaxoSmithKline.

5 National Cancer Institute Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results 2012 <http://seer.cancer.gov/statfacts/html/oralcav.html#survival>