

THE WHOLE TOOTH: DENTAL HEALTH & OLDER ADULTS

Painful teeth and gums are all too common in older adults. Arthritis, a stroke, Alzheimer's disease and other health conditions make brushing and flossing teeth difficult. Badly fitting dentures irritate gums and make eating painful. Older people produce less saliva and suffer from an uncomfortable dry mouth and bad breath. Certain medications also reduce saliva and cause mouth dryness.

People with memory disorders like Alzheimer's disease or who are depressed often forget to brush their teeth. A reminder from you will help your parent maintain good oral health.

A HEALTHY MOUTH FOR A HEALTHY BODY

Prevention is key to maintaining good oral health no matter how old you are. Suggestions for helping your older relatives avoid common dental problems:

- Encourage your older parent to visit the dentist at least twice a year for a thorough exam, cleaning, x-rays, and screening for oral cancer.
- If your relative complains of a dry mouth encourage her to drink more water and less coffee, alcoholic beverages, and sugary drinks.
- Brush teeth and floss teeth at least twice a day to prevent cavities and gum disease.
- Toothbrushes with large handles or electric toothbrushes are easier to use for people with arthritis or have had a stroke.
- Dentures should be removed and cleaned each night.

ORAL HEALTH FOR PEOPLE WITH MEMORY LOSS

It is important for people with memory disorders like Alzheimer's to maintain healthy teeth and gums. Many people with memory disorders forget how to care for their teeth so it's up to you to help them manage daily mouth care.

- Use step-by-step instructions: "Hold your toothbrush." "Put toothpaste on the brush." "Brush your teeth."
- Take your time. Wait until your parent completes each step before moving on to the next one.
- Make tooth care part of your parent's daily routine. Brush teeth at the same time every day. Clean dentures every night.
- Ask your dentist for tips to make tooth care easier.
- Check your relative's mouth regularly for changes in teeth, tongue or gums.
- Continue regular dental check-ups as long as possible.

PAYING FOR DENTAL CARE

Medicare does not cover routine dental services like cleaning, fillings, x-rays and dentures. However some community hospitals, dental clinics and dental schools offer discount or sliding scale oral health services to senior citizens. Contact your local Office on Aging or dental society for information.

HEALTHY TEETH...HEALTHY BODY

For busy caregivers it's often easy to overlook a parent's daily oral health until he or she develops a painful problem. Regular visits to the dentist and daily care at home will help your parent maintain healthy teeth and gums that are essential to overall good health.