

CARING FOR TEETH & MOUTH: THE BASICS FOR OLDER ADULTS & THEIR CAREGIVERS

According to some historians the Babylonians were the first people to take care of their teeth by chewing on sticks to remove food particles from their teeth and freshen their breath. Unfortunately the practice disappeared until World War II soldiers were required by the Army to brush their teeth regularly. When the war ended soldiers continued the habit when they returned home.

Since Babylonian days, the importance of tooth and gum hygiene and daily oral care has become regular part of the personal hygiene routines for people of all ages who have teeth. Daily brushing and flossing, improved toothpastes, and advances in dentistry have made it possible for people to maintain healthy teeth and gums well into later life.

A HEALTHY MOUTH AND HEALTHY TEETH: ESSENTIAL FOR WELLNESS IN LATER LIFE

With a bit of brushing, flossing and regular dental checkups, teeth and gums can often remain healthy for a lifetime. Sound teeth and healthy gums make it possible for an older adult to eat, speak, smile, and laugh without pain or embarrassment and also enhance his personal appearance.

With age, however, oral health problems like plaque buildup, dry mouth, cavities, tooth decay, gum disease, and oral cancers can trigger pain, swelling, sensitivity to hot and cold foods and drinks. Neglected teeth also detract from an older adult's personal appearance.

Thanks to advances in dentistry, most dentists have introduced new dental techniques for treatment and prevention many of the oral health problems common in older people.

FINDING THE BEST DENTIST FOR OLDER ADULTS

If your older family member has not seen a dentist recently or wants to change dentists suggest that he or she ask friends, relatives or family doctor to recommend a dentist. Your local dental society, dental school, or the American Dental Association can also suggest dentists.

Questions to ask when choosing a new dentist:

- What are office hours? Is the office in a convenient location?
- Are appointments available on Saturdays?
- Does the dentist provide emergency appointments when needed?
- Are the office staff and dental hygienists friendly? Do they clearly explain oral health treatments, procedures and preventive measures, cost of dental treatments and answer patients' questions?
- Does the dentist accept your parent's dental insurance?
- Are emergency services available after office hours? If not is another dentist available for emergency care?
- How long has the dentist been in practice?

- Where did he or she attend dental school?
- Does the dentist provide orthodontics, gum disease treatments or other specialties? If not, can he or she recommend an oral health specialist who does?

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING HEALTHY TEETH & GUMS

When a dental appointment is coming up, sit down with your older relative and ask if she has any current tooth, mouth or gum problems that she would like to discuss with the dentist. Let her know that new patients may be asked to complete a form listing chronic illnesses, painful mouth, sores or tenderness or injuries to the mouth. Before the appointment suggest that she to make a list of questions for the dentist so he or she can answer them and provide her with additional information about maintaining healthy teeth and gums..

Tobacco products are among the leading causes of mouth, throat and lung cancers. If you parent is a smoker volunteer help her to give up the habit. Her doctor can recommend medications and other strategies for quitting. If she is ready to quit suggest that she attend a “smoke-enders” group.

RADIOGRAPHIC DENTAL CHECKUPS

Most dentists will take x-rays of new patients’ teeth on their first visit with follow-up x-rays at least once a year. You and your older parent are probably used to the “bite-wing” x-rays dentists previously used to check for cavities, sores or other oral health problems.

Many dentists are now using digital images to examine teeth, gums and other areas of the mouth. These images are created with an electronic sensor placed in the patient’s mouth. They are displayed almost immediately on a screen where the patient and the dentist can identify cavities, mouth and gum sores and other oral abnormalities and make it possible for treatments to begin immediately.

The digital process is painless and takes only a few minutes to complete. If your parent needs additional information about the procedure, the dentist or hygienist can explain the process and its benefits more thoroughly to your older relative and you.

WHEN TO BRUSH, HOW TO BRUSH, CHOOSING A BRUSH

The American Dental Association recommends that everyone should floss their teeth and brush at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste to reduce tartar buildup, prevent cavities and maintain healthy gums.

Soft toothbrushes do not damage tooth enamel and are easier on the gums than firm bristled brushes. They also fit in the mouth comfortably. Brushes with larger handles are easier to manipulate for people with arthritis in their hands.

Older adults who find it difficult to use a manual toothbrush may get better results with an electric powered brush. Toothbrushes should be replaced every three or four months or sooner if your parent has had a cold, flu or other illness.

Dental floss should be strong enough to resist breakage. Waxed floss doesn’t get stuck or break between teeth as easily as plain floss.

THE BENEFITS OF GOOD ORAL HEALTH FOR OLDER PEOPLE

Most people don't realize how important their teeth and gums are until a toothache sets in or their dentist tells them they need an extraction, tooth filling, treatment for a gum infection or dentures. Regular oral health checkups, professional cleaning at least twice a year along with daily brushing and flossing will help your parent – and yourself – maintain healthy, pain-free teeth and gums. [rev.2/8/2011]