



For information about oral health care, please contact the Ontario Dental Association at **416-922-3900** or visit **[www.youroralhealth.ca](http://www.youroralhealth.ca)**

# Seniors Oral Care



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# Good Oral Care

If you are a member of Ontario's growing senior population, maintaining good oral health may be more important than you realize.

Mounting scientific evidence suggests that there is a link between oral health and a person's overall health, particularly among seniors. While striving to achieve optimal oral health is essential at any age, it has become especially true for seniors today because they are living longer and preserving their own teeth.

Yet, due to circumstances such as illness or decreased mobility, maintaining healthy teeth and gums at this stage of life can be more challenging than when you were younger.



To help protect your teeth and gums against oral disease and maintain overall good health, your oral hygiene routine should include:

- ✓ **Brushing and flossing your real or replacement teeth twice daily**
- ✓ **Using toothpaste containing fluoride**
- ✓ **Limiting sweets**
- ✓ **Visiting your dentist regularly**

This routine can often be difficult for seniors who are being cared for by others either at home or in a long-term care residence. Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself in need of some dental work.

The Ontario Dental Association is pleased to provide you with this overview of important information relevant to aging and oral care.

In addition, we have created a second brochure called *Seniors Oral Health: Daily Oral Care for Persons in Residential Care*. For more information, please contact the Ontario Dental Association or ask your dentist.



# Oral Disease

**Dental Caries (Tooth Decay)** is a major cause of tooth loss in all age groups, particularly among the elderly who frequently consume refined carbohydrates (sweet foods, drinks or certain medications). In the geriatric population, decay on root surfaces is prevalent due to root exposure as a side-effect of receding gums. Often tooth decay progresses without pain until the



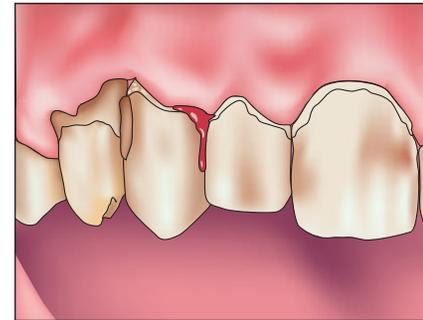
damage is significant and the tooth becomes brittle. If undetected or left untreated, the decay will reach the tooth's core, which may result in infection and can lead to general health complications.

## Try the following to minimize tooth decay:

- ✓ Substitute refined sugars with artificial sweeteners and avoid soft drinks\*
- ✓ Use fluorides to remineralize the surface of your teeth
- ✓ Use an anti-bacterial mouth rinse to reduce the level of bacteria in the mouth
- ✓ Brush and floss twice a day

\* Soft drinks sweetened with sugars or artificial sweeteners may not only cause enamel demineralization, but dehydration as well due to the presence of caffeine.

**Gum Disease** or gingivitis (inflammation of the gum tissue) is a common oral problem and may progress to bone disease or periodontitis (destruction of bone and the structures supporting



the teeth). Bone disease may lead to tooth loss if not assessed and treated properly. Gum defects or spaces between your gums and your teeth (referred to as pockets), can sometimes be seen in older people

and are not related to age. Often, they are related to bacteria and byproducts, including calculus build-up that has remained on the tooth surfaces for a long period of time. Both gingivitis and periodontitis respond well to proper oral hygiene routines and treatment by your dentist, who can help to remove tartar buildup and surface stain.

# Oral Disease

**Dry Mouth (Xerostomia)** can be caused by certain medications and medical conditions. The list of medications causing dry mouth is extensive. While there are many disease-specific medications on the list, some of the more common medications are:

- bronchodilators
- decongestants
- diuretics
- muscle relaxants
- narcotic analgesics
- sedatives
- anti-anxiety
- antihypertensives
- antidepressants
- antiparkinsonian

There are also many medical conditions that cause dry mouth. Two common causes are diabetes and Sjogren's syndrome, an autoimmune disorder that occurs mainly in women.

If severe, dry mouth may inhibit the ability to speak or swallow. Changes in saliva can also lead to rapid deterioration of oral and dental health. Your dentist can recommend various methods to restore moisture. Sugar-free candy\* or gum stimulates saliva flow. Moisture can also be replaced by using artificial saliva products or by taking frequent sips of water.

Ask your dentist for more information about the interactions between your medications, medical conditions and your oral health.

\* It is important to avoid lemon or citrus flavoured candy as these may contain acid levels high enough to cause enamel demineralization and, in time, cause tooth decay.

**Cancer** is a rare disease in the mouth, but it is more likely to develop in older adults who smoke or chew tobacco and/or abuse alcohol. Early diagnosis and treatment significantly increases long-term survival, which attests to the need for regular dental examinations. Even if you do not have any natural teeth, bi-annual oral cancer examinations by your dentist are recommended. All non-healing sores in the mouth or changes in voice deserve close attention. If you have a history of smoking (past or present), bi-annual oral assessments by your dentist are recommended. In some cases, it may be necessary to take a sample of tissue from suspicious sores in order to establish a proper diagnosis. Any change in your mouth that persists beyond 14 days, should be examined by your dentist.



# Dental Options

**A** healthy oral hygiene routine includes brushing and flossing twice daily and regular visits to your dentist that may involve having your teeth professionally cleaned or filling a cavity.

However, diligently brushing and flossing your teeth are not always enough to protect against the unexpected damage or loss of a tooth. When this happens, your dentist may recommend that the tooth be replaced in order to ensure a healthy mouth, regain your ability to chew, and prevent your teeth from shifting.

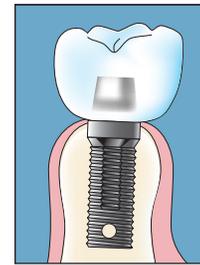
The following are some of the procedures that can be performed by your dentist. In difficult cases, your dentist may refer you for further consultation and treatment.

## Crowns

When a tooth has been damaged by decay or through an accident, rather than remove the tooth completely, it is possible to fit a cover – known as a crown or cap – over the remaining tooth. Under local anesthetic the tooth is reduced in size by the same thickness as the final crown, which will be cemented onto the tooth. An impression of your teeth and gums is then made and a temporary cap is fitted over the tooth until a permanent crown can be made. During your next visit, your dentist will remove the temporary cap and cement the crown onto your tooth.

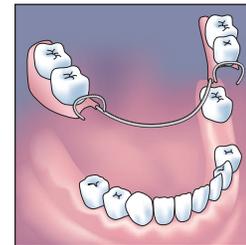
## Replacing a Lost Tooth

There are three main types of artificial teeth and each one is designed for a particular circumstance.



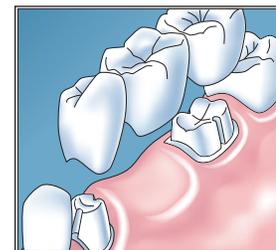
### Dental Implants

Dental implants are made by surgically placing one or more small metal posts beneath the gum directly into the jawbone. Implants are integrated with the surrounding bone and serve as anchors to which replacement teeth can be attached.



### Dentures

A removable or partial denture replaces all lost teeth in the arch. By clasping the remaining adjacent teeth, the denture is held in place. Where none of the natural teeth remain, a complete denture is required. In the case of a complete upper denture, suction helps hold it in place.



### Bridge

A bridge or 'fixed bridge' is a replacement appliance that is cemented to adjacent teeth and cannot be removed. Typically, the two remaining healthy teeth on either side of the lost tooth are prepared for crowns. A unit consisting of a false tooth and two crowns on either side is custom made to fill the area where the tooth has been lost. The appliance is then cemented into place.

# Dental Options

## Root Canal

Often when a tooth has become infected or abscessed as a result of decay or an injury, it is possible for your dentist to save your tooth by performing root canal treatment. During the root canal treatment, an opening is made in your tooth to access the infected nerve, which is then removed. Following root canal therapy, your dentist may place a temporary seal or a permanent filling over the tooth. Most teeth that have root canal treatments will require a crown to support the remaining tooth structure.



# Your Oral Health

The preceding information has been provided to help seniors better understand the importance of oral health.

To optimize your health, the Ontario Dental Association encourages you to practise proper oral hygiene, have regular dental examinations and talk to your dentist about your oral and overall health.



**Find @ Dentist**

If you need any assistance finding a dentist in your area, please contact the **Ontario Dental Association** at **416-922-3900** or visit **[www.youroralhealth.ca](http://www.youroralhealth.ca)**