

What is Good Dental Health?

Dental or oral health is concerned with your teeth, gums and mouth. The goal is to prevent complications such as tooth decay (cavities) and gum disease and to maintain the overall health of your mouth.

A healthy mouth, free of infections, injuries and other problems with teeth and gums, is important in maintaining your overall health.

Although a different set of medical professionals focuses on dental health, they are still part of your regular health care team.

Disease and other conditions can affect your dental health and dental problems can affect other parts of your body. Failing to properly care for your oral health may lead to other health problems.

You can help prevent or minimize many oral health problems by regular preventive steps (brushing, flossing and so on) and regular visits to dental health professionals.

Injuries to mouth

Injuries to the mouth and teeth can cause problems, especially for young people playing sports. Make sure young (and not so young) athletes use a properly fitted mouth guard, especially when playing contact sports or engaging in activities where falls and blows to the mouth are possible.

Dental health begins shortly after birth and continues the rest of your life. Constant and consistent oral health habits come from habits and patterns established as children under the direction of a parent.

Good oral health practices and regular visits to dental health professionals will help you enjoy the benefits of a bright smile and a pain-free mouth.

If you begin good oral health practices at an early age and stick with them through adulthood, the odds are good that you will have a healthy mouth, pleasant breath, strong teeth and a bright smile.

Even if you have let dental problems develop over time, it is never too late to see a dental health professional for corrective procedures. Thanks to modern practices, much of the pain some people fear is gone from dental health procedures.

Dental Health for Younger Children

It is important to begin establishing good dental health practices shortly after your child's birth. Many dental professionals recommend you arrange a first visit to the dentist before your child's first birthday.

However, good dental health begins before the first visit with your dental health professional. Many dentists recommend cleaning your baby's gums after every feeding using a clean washcloth or a damp gauze pad.

Consult your dentist or physician for specific details regarding your baby's oral health.

Selection

You should plan to brush your child's teeth until they are old enough to do a good job by themselves. Your dental care professional will help with toothbrush selection and technique.

Despite the fact that baby teeth loosen and fall out as your child grows older, they are very important to oral health. Baby teeth serve as placeholders for permanent teeth and need proper care and maintenance.

Proper amounts of fluoride on your baby's teeth will help prevent cavities and tooth decay. Many communities add fluoride to the water supply, however you should ask your dental health professional if supplements are needed, such as in vitamins or direct fluoride treatments.

Major concern

A major oral health concern for infants and toddlers is the use of sugary formulas, fruit juices or soft drinks in bottles or "sippy" cups. Do not put your child down for naps or bedtime with a bottle of sugary liquid such as many commercial formulas or fruit juice drinks.

Your child's baby teeth can decay the same as permanent teeth causing painful treatments and possible tooth loss.

Your good dental health choices when your child is young will help establish good habits and make it easier to enforce daily dental hygiene as they grow up.

Dental Health for Adults

Proper care of your teeth, mouth and gums is a life-long commitment. Good habits formed in younger years will make brushing, flossing and regular visits to your dentist a natural part of your schedule.

However, even if you did not have good dental health habits in younger years, it is never too late to start. Thanks to modern dental technology, treating even severe dental problems is easier, quicker and less uncomfortable than in the past.

Severe dental problems, such as cavities, gum disease and other conditions, may lead to the loss of teeth and a diminished quality of life. In addition, the links between good dental health and good overall health make taking care of your mouth, teeth and gums a must for a healthy lifestyle.

In addition to practicing good dental hygiene and regular visits to your dental health professional, there are steps you can take as an adult to improve your dental and overall health. These include:

- **Avoiding or stopping tobacco use** - Tobacco is the single biggest preventable health risk to adults. Not only is tobacco linked to cancer, heart disease, respiration problems and a host of other health concerns, it is also a major contributor to problems with the mouth, teeth and gums. Tobacco use may cause the gums to pull away from the teeth exposing roots and may lead to gum disease, oral cancer and other issues.
- **Promptly treating gum disease** - Your best defense against gum disease (periodontitis) is a commitment to good dental health, including brushing and flossing along with regular visits to the dentist. If your dentist discovers gum disease, have it treated promptly to avoid complications. Complications of gum disease include possible loss of teeth and the potential of other health problems, such as heart disease and problems treating diabetes.
- **Treat other complicating diseases and conditions** - Other health conditions such as diabetes and certain medications can increase your chances of developing gum disease and gum disease can aggravate other health problems. The lesson is that good oral health and overall health are linked. Gum disease may have other contributing causes and your dentist can discuss these with you when appropriate.

Regular visits to your dental professionals for examinations and cleanings will help you achieve and maintain good oral health. Good oral health and overall health go hand-in-hand. You will look better and feel better.

Dental Health and Other Diseases

Your overall health and your dental health are connected. Poor dental health habits increase your chances of illness or conditions and some diseases or conditions can affect your mouth.

What happens in your mouth (oral health) can and does affect other parts of your body. This is why good dental habits are important to your overall health.

Your mouth contains many types of bacteria. Some are harmless, while others can cause health problems in your mouth or other areas of your body.

Poor dental health habits can let harmful bacteria attack your gums and teeth resulting in gum disease and tooth decay. Good dental health habits (brushing twice a day, flossing and regular visits to your dental health professional), prevent most harmful bacteria from causing problems in your mouth and others areas of your body.

Under a variety of circumstances, harmful bacteria can enter your blood stream through your mouth or otherwise spread to other areas of your body.

When this happens, there is the potential for serious health consequences. Likewise, health problems and conditions can cause problems in your mouth.

Health Risks

Here are some of the potential problems you could experience due to poor dental habits and some conditions that may affect your dental health:

- Diabetes – Diabetes is a chronic condition involving many factors in your overall health, including a lowered resistance to infections. A lowered resistance to infections (bacteria) can produce gum disease and other problems in your mouth. People with diabetes are at greater risk for losing teeth thanks to potentially major gum infections.
- Heart disease – Researchers suspect a link between poor dental habits and cardiovascular disease. Inflammation from gum disease (periodontitis) caused by oral bacteria may play a role in the connection.
- Weakened immune systems – People with a weakened immune system may be more susceptible to infections of the mouth, which can spread to other parts of the body. People with HIV/AIDS may develop painful sores in the mouth, for example.
- Osteoporosis – Osteoporosis is a condition in which bones become brittle and subject to fracture. The condition, which frequently appears in later years, may be connected to tooth loss and jaw bone loss.
- Infections – Bacteria can move into your bloodstream due to gum disease. Infections can then spread to other parts of the body.
- Cancer – Oral cancer is a serious medical condition that requires prompt action. In its later stages, oral cancer can spread to other parts of the body. Tobacco use is a significant risk factor for developing oral (mouth) cancer.

Your best defense against the spread of infections and other medical problems from your mouth to other parts of your body are good oral health practices.