

Oral Health in Every Stage of Life

Whether you're a kid, a senior or somewhere in between, maintaining good oral care keeps you healthier in many other ways. Brushing, flossing and regular dental checkups are the cornerstones of a healthy smile. Here are some other tips for oral wellness at any age.

Babies & Toddlers

Teaching children good oral hygiene at an early age leads to lifelong oral health. When your baby's teeth start to come in, wipe the gums with a clean, moist washcloth and graduate to brushing with a child-size toothbrush. The first dental visit should take place within six months after the first tooth appears, no later than a child's first birthday.

Common Oral Health Concerns

- **Baby bottle tooth decay.** Never put baby to bed with a bottle, or use a bottle as a pacifier—both of which can lead to tooth decay.
- **Thumb sucking.** Thumb sucking after permanent teeth come in can cause problems with bite and tooth alignment.
- **Fluoride.** Infants and toddlers who don't get proper amounts of fluoride may be at risk for tooth decay.



Kids & Teens

Most kids start to lose baby teeth by age six or seven. Make sure your child has regular dental checkups, and is receiving the proper amount of fluoride to help prevent tooth decay. Another measure to protect his or her smile is sealants, a plastic coating that guards against cavities.

For an image-conscious teen, looking their best is important and a bright smile is a big part! The general eating habits of most teens can put them at risk of tooth decay and other oral health problems. Encourage healthy smiles in older kids and teens by encouraging them to carry a travel-sized toothbrush, chew sugar-free gum, drink plenty of water and snack on healthy foods. If your teen is active in sports consider having him or her wear a mouth guard to protect against injury.

Common Oral Health Concerns

- **Malocclusion.** Crowded or crooked teeth and jaw misalignment becomes most noticeable between the ages of 6 and 12.
- **Braces.** This common orthodontic treatment not only straightens teeth, but can also correct bite—making it easier to eat, speak and keep teeth and gums clean.
- **Wisdom teeth.** These typically come in during the late teens, and may need to be removed so they don't crowd teeth, cause pain or become infected.

Adults

Oral care is just as important to you now as it was when you were a child. Neglected teeth and gums can lead to infection, tooth loss and the wearing down of tissue and bone. Daily brushing and flossing can prevent these issues and keep teeth and gums healthy.

Common Oral Health Concerns

- **Gum disease.** The buildup of plaque and tartar can harbor bacteria that lead to gingivitis and if not treated, periodontitis. It's important to get treated as soon as possible.
- **Teeth grinding.** Also called bruxism, it often occurs unconsciously while you sleep and can cause serious damage to your teeth and jaw.
- **Root canals.** If a cavity is too deep to fill, a root canal may be required. During this treatment, the tooth's soft core is removed and the root canal is cleaned and sealed to prevent decay.

Seniors

Maintaining a healthy mouth in your senior years can stave off oral infections that may be associated with heart disease, pneumonia and other health problems common in older adults. Regular dental visits can help keep your mouth healthy, even if you have dentures.

Common Oral Health Concerns

- **Medications and cavities.** Medication can cause dry mouth, which can lead to tooth decay and other oral problems because saliva isn't around to keep plaque and infections at bay.
- **Gum disease.** The first stage of gum disease is called gingivitis, which is reversible. Left untreated, gingivitis may progress to a more destructive form called periodontitis.
- **Mouth cancer.** Early stages of oral cancer often go unnoticed because there is no pain. Watch for open sores, white or reddish patches and changes in the tongue and cheek lining that last more than two weeks.

Your oral health involves much more than teeth and gums—it's essential to your general health and wellbeing! Follow our simple tips for healthy smiles in all stages of your life.

See videos and oral health tips at the Dental Health Center at UnitedConcordia.com

Additional related information can be found on the websites of the Academy of General Dentistry, www.agd.org, and the American Dental Association, www.ada.org; and in *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General*, 2000.