



# Journey through Health: Mouth, Teeth and Gums

## EXTENSION

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## Age-Related Mouth, Teeth, and Gum Changes

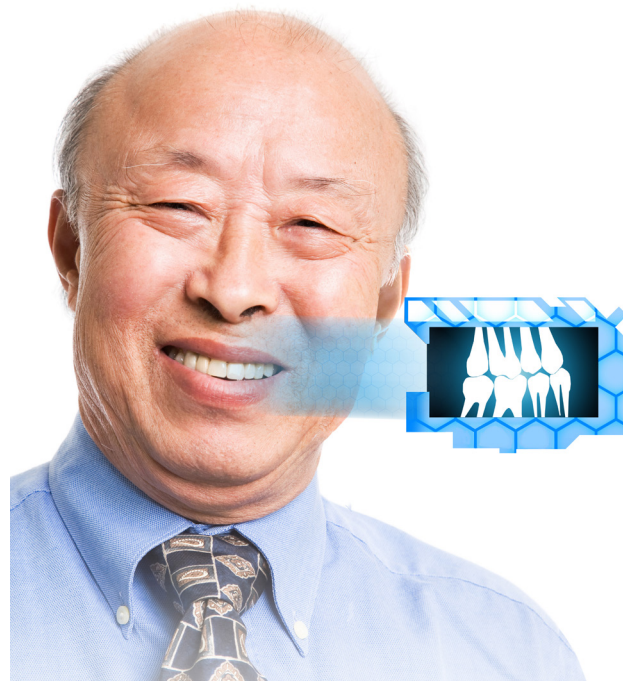
Several oral problems tend to increase with age including dry mouth, tooth decay, gum disease, tooth loss, and oral cancer. Many of these are associated with decreased saliva production which tends to occur with age and use of certain medications.

## Diet and Mouth, Teeth, and Gum Health

Oral health and good nutrition are interrelated. Good oral health promotes good nutrition. For example, older adults with good oral health tend to consume more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and meats. Likewise, good nutrition promotes good oral health.

**Dry mouth.** Decreased saliva and certain medications can result in dry mouth. Dry mouth can make it hard to taste, chew, and swallow. Sipping water or other sugarless drinks can help keep the mouth moist. In addition, chewing sugarless gum may help to promote saliva. Furthermore, avoiding tobacco and limiting alcohol and caffeine may also help because these can dry out the mouth.

**Tooth decay.** Poor dental hygiene is the main cause of tooth decay. However, diet can have an indirect role in tooth decay. Bacteria



in plaque ferment carbohydrates, especially sugars, and produce acids which can cause tooth decay. Carbohydrate foods that tend to stick to the teeth can particularly promote decay. In addition, frequently eating and drinking sugary foods and beverages provides a constant source of food for bacteria. Limiting intake of sugary foods and beverages, especially between meals, can help reduce tooth decay.

Saliva helps to protect against tooth decay in many ways. Saliva helps to keep the teeth clean, contains antibacterial agents, and helps to buffer acids produced by bacteria. However, because saliva production tends to decrease with age, and the use of certain medications, the risk of tooth decay is increased.

**Gum disease.** Plaque can build up along and under the gum line. Bacteria in plaque can lead to infections of the gums and bones that hold the teeth. Infection of the gums is called gingivitis. Gingivitis can make the gums tender and bleed easily. If the infection extends into the bone this is called periodontitis. Periodontitis can damage the bone and tissues that support the teeth, which can lead to tooth loss.

Although bacterial infection is the cause of gum disease, many health conditions including diabetes, poor nutrition, and a weakened immune system can increase the rate and severity of the disease. Tobacco use can also promote gum disease. Overall good nutrition is needed to support the body's immune system, fight infections, and help wounds heal.

**Tooth loss.** Tooth decay and gum disease are leading causes of tooth loss. Tooth loss can make chewing difficult. In addition, dentures are not as effective for chewing as natural teeth. As a result, people who have lost teeth often choose foods that are soft and easy to chew. This can result in increased intake of refined carbohydrates (which tend to be higher in fat, added sugar, and calories) and decreased intake of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and meats. Over time, limited food choices can lead to a poor quality diet.

**Oral cancer.** Oral cancers tend to increase with age. Risk factors for oral cancers include

tobacco and alcohol use, sunlight exposure (lip cancer), and a diet low in fruits and vegetables. A diet high in fruits and vegetables is associated with a lower risk of oral cancers. Fruits and vegetables are a good source of many antioxidant nutrients (vitamin C, vitamin E, and carotenoids), which may help lower the risk of oral cancers.

## MyPlate Messages Promoting Mouth, Teeth and Gum Health

Several of the MyPlate messages can help promote oral health.

### Build a Healthy Plate

- Make half your plate fruits and vegetables
- Drink adequate fluid each day.

### Cut Back on Foods High in Saturated Fats, Added Sugars, and Salt

- Choose foods and drinks with little or no added sugar.

### Eat the Right Amount of Calories for You

- If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so sensibly.

### Additional Recommendations for Mouth, Teeth, and Gum Health

- Practice good oral hygiene.
- Have regular dental exams.
- Avoid tobacco.

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