

How to Keep Your Teeth, Gums Healthy

Tips to prevent tooth loss, gum disease and more

by: Dorothy Foltz-Gray | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | March 8, 2012

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"Watch your mouth!" your mother might have reprimanded when you said something naughty, but it's also excellent advice to follow for maintaining your [health](#) as you age.

Doctors are beginning to realize that the condition of a patient's gums, teeth and mouth is an important indicator of overall health, because the mouth can be the gateway for bacteria to cause problems in other parts of the body.

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Don't give tooth loss, gum disease a chance: Pick up that toothbrush and don't forget to floss. — Photo by Justin Borucki/Image Source/Corbis

[Periodontal disease](#) — bacterial infection that affects the gums and bone — has been linked to heart disease, arthritis and diabetes. "Bacteria from the mouth can get into the bloodstream, affecting parts of the body like the heart or joints, triggering inflammatory reactions," says Alexandre Vieira, associate professor of oral biology at the University of Pittsburgh.

Despite the dangers, many of us slacken on teeth care after retirement — especially if dental insurance isn't an option. According to a 2011 review study by Vieira and

colleagues, over half of people over age 65 have root cavities in teeth where gum has receded. Along with the usual suspects — [too many sweets](#), and not brushing and flossing enough — saliva contains fewer substances to fight bacteria as we age. And medications such as blood pressure drugs, antidepressants and diuretics can lessen saliva, inviting decay.

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Still, tooth loss and gum disease are not necessarily a disease of aging. With a little vigilance, men and women over 50 can have healthy mouths, says June Sadowsky, an associate professor at the University of Texas School of Dentistry in Houston, who specializes in geriatric dentistry.

Below are common problems to watch for, and the best ways to prevent or treat them.

Tooth Decay

As we age, inflammation from bacteria can cause gum tissue to recede around the roots of the teeth, exposing the root. "That exposed tooth tissue is softer, so it can be attacked more easily by bacteria," says Marsha Pyle, dean of the School of Dentistry at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. Add a dry mouth and bacteria multiply. "Saliva has a pH, or acidity level, of 7, which is neutral," says Sadowsky. "Without saliva, the mouth is more acidic and bacteria thrive."

Remedies: Brush and floss at least twice a day, says Sadowsky: "Electric brushes are good for people who over-brush, wearing away the outside of their teeth. But don't move it back and forth as you would a regular toothbrush: Put it on the tooth and gum line, let it spin and move it to the next tooth."

Also key: Brush with a fluoride toothpaste and rinse with a fluoride mouthwash. Drink fluoridated bottled water as well. "Fluoride slows down the amount of mineral loss from teeth when you have the lower, more acidic pH that comes from bacteria," Vieira says.