

Revive Dental Care Information Sheet

All About Dental Care for Older People

Am I certain to lose my teeth?

No. If you look after your teeth, and have help from your dentist and hygienist, you will be able to keep your teeth for life.

Gum disease and tooth decay can be prevented whatever your age.

What particular problems may older people have?

Your gums may recede (shrink back) as you get older, and your teeth may become a little more sensitive as a result.

Your dentist or hygienist will be able to show you the best way to brush to keep any gum problems under control. They may also suggest a mouthwash to deal with the sensitivity.

You may find it harder to clean your teeth if you have problems moving your hands or arms, or if your eyesight is less than perfect.

Again, you can get help and advice on the best aids to use. A magnifying mirror and a good light are often helpful.

If you have lost some teeth, and have bridges or dentures, you may have particular cleaning needs and problems. Your dentist or hygienist can help you with these.

Some people take medication which makes their mouth dry. Saliva helps to protect your teeth against decay, so if you have less saliva than usual ask your dentist for advice. Or you can get special products, including artificial saliva, over the counter in most chemists.

Should I expect to have problems with my gums?

Gum problems are caused by a build-up of bacteria called 'plaque', which forms constantly on your teeth and gums.

It is important to remove this plaque to avoid gum inflammation. If the plaque is not removed, the gum inflammation will, in time, affect the bone under the gums.

This bone supports the tooth roots, so your teeth may gradually become loose.

How do I know if I have gum disease?

Many people may not know they have gum disease, because it is often painless. Some common signs are:

- gums that bleed when brushed
- loose teeth
- receding gums
- bad breath

Not everyone has all these signs. You may have only one.

Can I still get tooth decay?

Yes. The same plaque which causes gum inflammation can cause decay, especially when combined with sugary foods and drinks.

There is a particular risk of decay when the gum has receded, as the 'neck' of the tooth is not protected by enamel.

How can I prevent gum disease and tooth decay?

Thoroughly remove plaque from your teeth or dentures, if you have them, at least twice a day:

- Use a toothpaste containing 1350 to 1500ppm (parts per million) of fluoride. There are also many special types of toothpaste on the market, including tartar-control and total-care toothpastes. Your dentist may prescribe a higher-fluoride toothpaste if they think you need it.
- Clean in between your teeth every day with 'interdental' brushes or floss – if you just brush, this cleans no more than about 60 percent of the surface of your teeth.
- Cut down on how often you have food and drinks containing sugar.
- Visit your dentist and hygienist regularly, as often as they recommend.

What do I need to clean my teeth properly?

You need a small-headed, medium-textured toothbrush and a fluoride toothpaste.

To help clean between your teeth you can use an 'interdental brush', tape, or floss. If you have arthritis you may find it hard to grip a toothbrush handle, but you can get handle adapters.

Electric toothbrushes are also ideal for people with limited movement. The handles are thicker and easier to hold, and the head does most of the work.

There are many products to choose from, and your dentist or hygienist can help you decide which are best for you.

How do I know if I have removed all the plaque?

Plaque can be stained with food dye painted onto your teeth with a cotton bud, or with special 'disclosing tablets' you can get from the dentist.

This stain is harmless and will show any areas of your mouth which need cleaning more carefully. Look particularly where the teeth and gums meet.

Brushing again will remove the stained plaque.

What if I have missing teeth?

There are three main ways to replace the missing teeth. The first is with a removable false tooth or teeth – a partial or full denture.

The second is with a fixed bridge. A bridge is usually used when there are fewer teeth to replace, or when the missing teeth are only on one side of the mouth.

The third way is a dental implant. This is a titanium metal rod which is placed into the jawbone. It is used to support one or more false teeth.

Usually, both the false teeth and their supporting rod are called an 'implant'.

What causes mouth ulcers?

Mouth ulcers can be caused by broken teeth, poorly fitting dentures or sharp pieces of food.

Once the cause is removed, ulcers should heal within 3 weeks. If you notice an ulcer which does not heal, see your dentist promptly.

Many serious conditions, such as mouth cancer, can be treated better if they are diagnosed early at a routine check-up.

What if somebody is housebound?

Contact your local Dentist to see if they will make home visits.