**Oral Health and Older Adults**

*Did you know that among adults 65 years and older…?*

* Nearly all (96%) have had a cavity.
* 1 in 5 have untreated tooth decay.[[1]](#endnote-2)
* About 2 in 3 (68%) have gum disease.[[2]](#endnote-3)
* 1 in 5 have lost all their teeth.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Oral health is an essential but often overlooked health issue for older adults. While adults 65 and older can face unique oral health challenges, aging does not have to mean poor oral health and tooth loss.

Nevertheless, the aging process as well as chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, arthritis, cancer) can result in dental problems. Prescription medications can cause a decrease in saliva (i.e., dry mouth) which irritates the soft tissues in the mouth, causing soreness and leading to infections. Without good saliva flow to clean your mouth, tooth decay and mouth infections can become much more common. Dentures can also affect the ability to eat nutritious food. People without teeth or with dentures often prefer soft, easily chewed foods instead of foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables that are usually more nutritious. Studies show that the risk of malnutrition is greater in adults 60 and older and those who have tooth loss.

The good news is that you can keep your teeth for a lifetime. Below are some simple steps you can take at home to ensure the best possible oral health as you age:

* Brush your teeth thoroughly twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, and floss once a day to remove dental plaque. If you are unable to brush after a meal or snack, rinse your mouth with water to get rid of food particles.
* Drink fluoridated water, if available.
* Don’t smoke or use other tobacco products.
* Eat a balanced diet with fruits and vegetables and limit sugary snacks and drinks.
* Limit alcohol.
* If you have diabetes, work to maintain control of the disease. This will decrease your risk for other complications, including gum disease. Treating gum disease may also help lower your blood sugar level.
* If your medication causes dry mouth, ask your doctor for a different medication that may not cause this condition. If dry mouth cannot be avoided, drink plenty of water, chew sugarless gum, and avoid tobacco products and alcohol.
* If you have limited movement, consider using an electric toothbrush to make it easier for you to brush your teeth.
* Visit your dentist at least once a year, even if you have no teeth or have dentures.

1. Dye BA, Thornton-Evans G, Xianfen L, Iafolla TJ. [Dental Caries and Tooth Loss in Adults in the United States, 2011-2012](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db197.pdf). NCHS Data Brief, no 197. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics; 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Colby SL, Ortman JM. [*Projections of the size and composition of the US Population: 2014 to 2060.*](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf)Current Population Reports, P25-1143. Washington DC: US Census Bureau; 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Dye BA, Thornton-Evans G, Xianfen L, Iafolla TJ. [Dental Caries and Tooth Loss in Adults in the United States, 2011-2012](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db197.pdf). NCHS Data Brief, no 197. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics; 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)