

# Smilematters

## PATIENT FACT SHEET

### Oral Health Care for the “50-Plus” Patient

If you're over age 50, you are part of the fastest-growing segment of the United States population. But it's important to know that there's no reason you can't keep your teeth for a lifetime, since tooth loss is simply the result of oral disease, not the aging process.

Regular dental visits are especially important for seniors, since many suffer from dry mouth, which slows down the flow of saliva. Saliva plays a major role in preventing tooth decay by rinsing away food particles and neutralizing harmful acids. Dry mouth often comes with old age, but can also be caused by medications such as antihistamines, decongestants, antidepressants and diuretics. If you have problems with dry mouth, talk with us during your next dental appointment, as we can recommend ways to restore moisture to your mouth.

Along with regular dental visits, it's important to floss daily and brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste. Ask your dental team about fluoride rinses and gels, since studies show that seniors who brush regularly with fluoride toothpaste or use a fluoride rinse or gel regularly have fewer cavities. Cavities aren't just for kids! Older adults are most likely to get cavities where old fillings have chipped or where root surfaces are left unprotected by receding gums.

Following these simple preventive measures should help prevent seniors from joining the 42 percent of the population over 65 who wear dentures. But even seniors with no natural teeth still need to visit the dentist regularly, since many aspects of oral health, such as adjusting dentures that don't fit properly and oral cancer screenings, can be handled during routine dental visits.

Increasing years can bring on gum and bone recession, dry mouth, brittle teeth, periodontal disease and side effects of drug treatment, all of which can deteriorate oral health. Many older adults are faced with medical problems that can affect their general overall health as well as their dental health.

#### Oral Health Tips for Seniors

- Be sure to inform your dentist of any medications you are taking, as well as any changes in medications.
- It's important to continue to floss daily and brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Eat well-balanced meals and try to avoid too many sugary foods and drinks.
- Always be aware of any changes in your oral health, such as a sore that does not heal or a lump or rough spot in your mouth. Report these changes to your dentist right away, as your dentist could be your first line of defense for early detection of oral cancer.
- If you are faced with a physical disability, or perhaps can't hold on to your toothbrush as well as you would like due to arthritis, talk to your dentist about some ideas that will make your home oral care easier.
- Be sure to talk to your dentist if you experience an unusually dry mouth. You may notice a constant sore throat, burning sensation, difficulty swallowing, hoarseness or dry nasal passages.

People are living longer due to technological advancements, and their teeth do benefit from these improvements. Technology in oral health, such as electric toothbrushes and dental implants, can preserve the teeth for those who suffer from arthritis, tooth loss due to decay or periodontal disease.