

Dental Health and Eating Well

Oral health has a direct and hugely significant impact on the quality of life of older people.

Poor diet and a lack of good oral hygiene can lead to tooth decay, the removal of teeth and the need to fit dentures.

This can make it difficult to chew and enjoy nutritious food, reduce self-esteem and self confidence, cause problems with communication and lead to social isolation.

How to tell if someone has dental problems

There are several behavioral changes that may indicate that someone is experiencing dental problems. These may include:

- refusal to eat (particularly hard or cold foods)
- frequent pulling at the face or mouth
- leaving previously worn dentures out of the mouth
- increased restlessness, moaning or shouting
- disturbed sleep
- refusal to take part in daily activities
- Aggressive behavior

If there is no explanation for the change in behavior, arrangements should be made to identify the cause. This should include a dental assessment as part of the process.

Mouth checks

It is important to have regular mouth checks, whether the person has teeth, dentures or no teeth at all. Regular mouth checks can highlight any problems so that they can be treated as soon as possible.

Dental disease

There are two main types of dental disease - gum disease and tooth decay. Both can cause discomfort or pain and can lead to the development of infection.

Gum disease: Gum disease can cause inflamed and bleeding gums, gum recession, loose teeth and bad breath. It is caused by the build up of dental plaque.

Tooth decay: Tooth decay is caused by the action of dental plaque on the teeth. Essentially, the bacteria in plaque feed on sugar, producing acid, which in turn attacks the tooth, causing decay. High-energy food supplements contain high levels of sucrose - a form of sugar. If they are used on a regular basis, it is **important that the teeth are kept very clean** to minimise the risk of decay.

Drugs and dental problems

Many types of drugs including antidepressants, antipsychotics and sedatives can leave a person with a dry mouth. Saliva has a cleansing effect on the mouth and teeth. Its absence leads to a build up of bacteria and food debris, gum disease and dental decay. Saliva also acts as a lubricant and dry mouth can cause problems with dentures, including discomfort and looseness. If medication is syrup-based (eg lactulose), there is an increased danger of tooth decay. The doctor may be able to prescribe a sugar-free alternative if asked.

Dentures

A significant number of older people have partial or full dentures. Plaque can easily build up on dentures. If partial dentures are worn, it is important that oral hygiene is well maintained or the increased plaque accumulation will encourage gum disease and tooth decay.

Dentures can become loose and begin to damage the mouth if they have been worn for a number of years. As these changes happen slowly, the individual can adapt to them without realising that the mouth is being harmed.

