Seniors and Oral HealthA Fact Sheet



As people age there are subtle changes in the mouth that occur.

Some of the changes include:

- dry mouth possibly due to increased use of medications
- increased risk of gum disease
- risk of oral cancer
- problems with cavities or decay due to inadequate brushing and flossing

The percentage of the population age 65 years and older is increasing; therefore a greater number of persons age 65 years and older in Colorado will be in need of oral health services in the coming years. ²

And, older Americans can expect to live longer than ever before. Under existing conditions, women who live to age 65 can expect to live about 19 years longer, men about 16 years longer. ⁴

Equally important to general health for seniors is good oral care of teeth and gums.

- Colorado ranks in the top three states with the greatest percentage of seniors retaining their natural teeth at 60.5 percent. ¹
- However, 18 percent of Coloradans over age 65 have lost all their natural teeth.
- Having missing teeth can cause problems speaking and eating and can influence a persons choices in food quality and quantity.

60% of Colorado seniors still have their natural teeth.

- While Americans paid out-of-pocket for approximately one-half of all dental care expenses in 2000, people age 65 and older paid more than 75 percent of their dental expenses. ³
- Medicare, the primary source of medical coverage for seniors, does not include dental benefits, and Colorado Medicaid covers only those dental procedures that are directly related to a concurrent medical condition.
- For low-income seniors taking care of their oral health may be so cost prohibitive that it results in decreased quality of life as they choose not address their oral health needs.

"Those who suffer the worst oral health are found among the poor of all ages, with poor children and poor older Americans particularly vulnerable." Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2000.

Dry Mouth

As people age the chances of having chronic diseases increases. Many older Americans take multiple prescription and over-the-counter medications.

Often these medications will cause side effects to occur in the mouth. The most common side effect is dry mouth.

Some of the medications that can cause dry mouth are antihistamines, diuretics, antipsychotics and antidepressants. These medications can reduce the saliva flow in the mouth.

Dry mouth can cause difficulty chewing, speaking and swallowing. It also leads to cavities and can cause burning mouth syndrome and other soft tissue problems.



Gum Disease

- Gum disease, or periodontal disease is an infection of the supporting structures of the teeth. Often it leads to tooth loss if left untreated.
- The prevalence of periodontal diseases increases with age, from 6 percent among persons 25-34 years to 41 percent among those 65 years and older.
- This increase is not necessarily due to older persons being more susceptible to periodontal diseases, but rather to the consequences of these diseases (i.e., bone loss and gingival recession), which accumulate over time and are thus more evident in the elderly. ⁶

Tooth Decay

- Decay untreated by a dentist usually gets worse, resulting in pain and the potential loss of teeth. Dental caries is one of the main causes of tooth loss for both young and old adults. ⁴
- Many seniors suffer from arthritis or other dexterity problems, making it difficult for them to brush and floss.

Oral Cancer

- Cancers of the oral cavity are among the most debilitating and disfiguring, as surgery and treatment of oral cancer often affect appearance, speech, ability to eat and quality of life. ²
- On average, 318 new cases of oral cancer are diagnosed and 72 deaths occur each year in Colorado due to oral cancer.
- Dental checkups are key as dentists can examine oral tissues for cancerous or pre-cancerous lesions. As with all cancers, early detection is key to survival.

Seniors should consider the following tips if they have difficulty in brushing and flossing:

- Use a wide elastic band to attach the toothbrush handle to the hand.
- Enlarge the toothbrush handle with a piece of wood or plastic.
- Use an electric toothbrush.
- Tie the ends of floss together, making a circle before flossing.
- Use a floss holder

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