



Small Bites



Do continue to brush twice a day and floss daily.



Do increase calcium intake to maintain good bone health.



Do discuss your options if you need to replace teeth.



Do continue regular dental appointments.



Do get screened for oral cancer and other dental diseases.



Don't assume that dry mouth or tooth loss is a natural part of aging - and know there are many ways to remedy these problems.

Part 1 of 2

As Bob enjoys his retirement years, he's surprised that a lot of what his dentist told him when he was a kid is still true today. Brushing and flossing every day, seeing the dentist regularly and eating healthy are just as important now as they were 60 years ago. In fact, cavities and gum disease are common chronic diseases in people ages 65 and older. More than 20 percent have untreated tooth decay and 90 percent have fillings. Moderate to severe gum disease occurs in more than 60 percent of people over age 65.

Back to Basics

Bob grew up in the time before widespread community water fluoridation and good preventive dental care. Even though he has lost some teeth due to tooth decay and gum disease, Bob has learned that **regular professional preventive care remains important at any age**. He now maintains regular six-month checkups. Unfortunately, about a fourth of adults ages 65 and older haven't seen the dentist in more than five years.

Regrettably, Bob has smoked cigarettes for much of his adult life. He recently quit when he learned that on top of heart disease, stroke and other serious life-shortening illnesses caused by smoking, it also put him at high risk for oral cancer and gum disease. Regular exams and preventive care help Bob's dentist screen for signs of cancer and keep Bob's risk for gum disease under control. Between exams, Bob performs monthly self-checks for oral cancer. He uses a mirror to look in his mouth and throat for red or white patches, sores, lumps or any other changes.

When Bob was a kid, his mom told him he needed calcium for strong bones. That's still true. In order to help prevent osteoporosis, which weakens bones and makes them more likely to fracture, Bob drinks a lot of milk and enjoys cheese and yogurt. Women are even more susceptible to developing osteoporosis, so Bob's wife also eats a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D. Regular physical activity helps them both keep bones strong.

Feeling Dry

Like many adults over the age of 65, Bob takes prescription medications, which sometimes cause dry mouth. This can make it hard to swallow, taste or even speak. Contrary to popular belief, **dry mouth is not a normal part of aging**. After consulting with his physician, Bob discovered that his blood pressure medicine may be the culprit behind his dry mouth.

Diuretics, analgesics, antihistamines, decongestants, and anti-depressants can cause dry mouth. Certain conditions can also affect saliva production, including diabetes, Sjögren's disease, Parkinson's disease and lupus.

To combat dry mouth, Bob's physician suggested that he avoid foods like crackers, chips and cookies. Spicy or acidic foods, in addition to tobacco and alcohol, can also make the problem worse. To help stimulate his saliva glands, Bob stays hydrated, chews sugar-free gum, and keeps water at his bedside to sip on at night. Bob's dentist also recommended some over-the-counter artificial saliva products. If the problem persists, his physician may try switching Bob to a different blood pressure medication.

Keep Cancer at Bay

Bob smoked and often worked in the sun over the course of his life. While visiting with his dentist, Bob learned that any tobacco use, including cigarettes, cigars, pipes or chew, and high intake of alcohol are causes for oral cancer. Long-term sun exposure also puts him at high risk for lip cancer. He also knows that oral cancer affects twice as many men than women, so he realizes he's at risk. He's right to be concerned, as half of all oral cancer diagnoses occur in people older than 68.

In addition to getting screened regularly, Bob also does monthly self-checks for white or red patches, mouth sores that won't heal, difficulty or pain swallowing, or lumps in his neck or cheek. The earlier the cancer is caught, the better the chances are of beating it.

Expect to Keep Teeth for a Lifetime

Older adults like Bob, are finding that the alternatives – such as implants, fixed bridges, and partial or full dentures – have come a long way in allowing older adults to continue to enjoy the benefits afforded by a healthy smile. For more information, please refer to part two of “The Golden Years.”



Part 2 of 2

Replacing Lost Teeth

The number of people over age 65 will double to more than 80 million over the next two decades. If you've lost some teeth over the years, you're not alone: Nearly half of Americans ages 65 and older have lost six or more teeth, and 20 percent have lost all of their teeth. Fortunately dentures, implants and bridges can help older adults continue to function much as they did when they still had their full set of natural teeth.

Many ways to replace missing teeth:

- Fixed partial dentures (bridges) are often recommended when only a few teeth are missing and the teeth and gums on either side of the missing space(s) are strong enough to support the additional load. Crowns are made for the teeth on either side of the space with connecting tooth forms filling in the missing teeth. The whole assembly is cemented into place.
- Removable partial dentures are recommended if several teeth in a row need replacement or if the remaining teeth are too weak to support a fixed bridge. Partials are usually attached to adjacent teeth by clasps that hook around the outside of the teeth. It's all nearly invisible when the prosthesis is in place.
- Full dentures are usually recommended when all natural teeth are gone. They consist of a base that contains a complete arch of teeth. The top denture fits into the roof of the mouth. The bottom denture is made in a horseshoe shape to accommodate the tongue.
- Overdentures are a variation on full dentures that use the roots of remaining "good" teeth or dental implants as anchors. Preserving those roots helps prevent the loss of the bone that supports the dentures. This type of denture also provides a more natural chewing sensation than traditional complete dentures.

All types of removable dentures require similar care. They should be removed every day for cleaning using a brush and cleanser specifically designed for dentures. They should never be cleaned using boiling water since this may cause damage. Partial dentures should be removed before cleaning any natural teeth.

Dental Implants

Implants are like artificial tooth roots and are surgically attached to the jawbone and gum tissue. They can then be used as an anchor for removable full dentures or as artificial replacements for individual teeth. **Dental implants stay in place better than dentures do**, they help with proper chewing, they don't need to be removed nightly and they don't often need to be replaced.

Though Americans may have once expected the loss and deterioration of teeth as part of the aging process, that's no longer true. Most adults in their 50s, 60s and beyond are keeping their natural teeth – and enjoying good oral health – longer than ever.