

Your Amazing Teeth

Keeping Your Teeth Healthy In The Golden Years

(NAPSA)—Seventy-five million baby boomers in the United States today are reaching their prime, which means their teeth are not getting any younger. “An important contributor to overall health is oral health,” says Hilde Tillman, D.M.D., division head, Geriatric Dentistry at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in Boston.

Just forty years ago, the majority of older adults lost their teeth to aging. Now, losing natural teeth is not inevitable—the rate of tooth loss in older people (50-64 years old) has dropped significantly—by 60 percent—since 1960. Teeth can be maintained throughout life through good care and prevention. “Prevention is key—what you can prevent, you don’t have to treat,” explains Tillman. Tufts dentists suggest brushing twice a day, flossing daily, visiting the dentist at least every six months, and avoiding sugary foods and tobacco.

Tufts dental experts alert their older patients to the changes that occur in an aging mouth, which increase the risk for tooth decay and certain oral diseases, especially gum disease. Through proper oral hygiene, they advise these changes can be avoided.

Not only does plaque build up more quickly on older teeth, but older adults are also at greater risk for tooth decay around their fillings. This plaque buildup is espe-



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cially problematic since the current generation of older adults grew up without fluoride protection and has more fillings than younger people, creating an even greater risk for tooth decay. Furthermore, as one ages, gum tissue recedes and exposes more of the tooth, which increases their risk for tooth decay.

A common problem among older people is the decline in their sense of taste and smell, which is caused by aging, disease, medications, and medical treatments. Fading of the sense of taste results in a diminished appetite, and subsequently, inadequate nutrition. Furthermore, people with ill-fitting bridges or dentures cannot eat properly and typically have poor nutrition. Dr. Tillman reminds older patients that oral

health and nutrition are closely linked—if one is neglected, they will both be adversely affected. Often the diets of older adults lack adequate calcium, protein and other essential nutrients that are crucial to dental health. Some individuals may need to supplement their diet with multivitamins, mineral supplements or both, with the approval of their physician. Tufts Dental School teaches students to survey a patient’s diet as part of the preliminary checkup, which provides insight into the patient’s dental and overall health.

The general health of older adults affects their dental health in many ways. There are about 700 medications that cause dry mouth, which puts teeth at a high risk for tooth decay and gum disease. Tufts dental experts advise patients to discuss their medical history, prescription and over-the-counter medication usage with their dentists—they can suggest some quick and simple ways to avoid dry mouth and its problems.

“Overall, we stress total patient care. The dentist is an important part of a medical team, which includes the primary care physician, medical specialists, rehabilitation nurses, physical therapists, and so forth. Together we can boost the quality of life for older adults,” says Tillman. “It’s all about quality of life—it’s worth the investment,” says Tillman.