



Brushing up on teeth

He ora niho, he ora tangata

Good oral health is an important part of general health and wellbeing as we age. This Age Concern Information Sheet provides answers to questions frequently asked by older people



Healthy teeth, healthy ageing

Healthy teeth, or properly fitted dentures, make a significant contribution to healthy ageing. The ability to chew and swallow makes it easier to have a good diet and eat foods like fruit, vegetables, meat and nuts.

Also, we should not underestimate how important it is not to be ashamed of how our teeth look.

Dentists tell us that the most important thing we can do is to look after our teeth and gums and that even small changes in habits, like starting to floss can make a big difference at any age. Our teeth need to be given life-long attention.



What changes might I notice as I get older?

Your teeth might start to appear slightly yellower. This is because the enamel on them wears and becomes more translucent to show the naturally yellow dentine below the enamel cap.

You might also notice that your gums start to shrink. This may be due to gum disease. Keeping your teeth and gums free of dental plaque (the coating of bacteria that causes tooth decay and gum disease) will greatly reduce the chances of tooth and gum problems, including gum shrinkage. Your dentist can provide you with advice on avoiding gum disease.



What is the best way to look after my teeth?

- Brush morning and evening with a fluoride toothpaste
- Floss or clean in between teeth at least once daily. If you find it hard to use dental floss try other aids like interdental brushes
- Limit your consumption of sugary foods and drinks
- Visit your dentist regularly.

Will I lose my teeth as I age?

Not necessarily. Research shows more people are keeping their natural teeth as they age. Tooth loss is more likely if you have disease and tooth decay. Thorough, gentle twice-daily tooth brushing along with the effective use of floss and mouthwashes and regular dental check-ups should prevent you from losing your teeth. It is important to reduce your consumption of sugary food and drinks. Remember sugar in your tea or coffee counts!

Why are my gums just as important as my teeth?

Healthy gums help keep your teeth in place. Build up of dental plaque can cause inflammation of gums and over time, if left untreated this inflammation can lead to the loss of the supporting bone and eventual loss of a tooth, or teeth.





The treatment my dentist recommends is too expensive for me – what are my options?

There may be several treatment options to help solve a problem. Ask your dentist to list the advantages, disadvantages and cost of each option.

Shop around. You may need to get advice and quotes from

different dentists in order to find something you can afford. It may also be possible to stagger the treatments that you need so that the most urgent things are done first, and the rest when you can afford them.

Some dentists offer discounts for SuperGold Card holders or Community Service Card holders. Dental departments of some hospitals also offer low-cost treatment for Community Service Card holders, but this is very limited.

You can apply to Work and Income for a non-recoverable special needs grant for emergency treatment. You can also apply for an advance on your Super to pay for dentures or dental treatment. In both cases, entitlement is based on income and savings and there are limits to how much can be given.

What can I do if I find it difficult to hold a toothbrush?

You can try using an electric toothbrush instead of a manual toothbrush. Or you can modify the hand-grip of a manual toothbrush to make it easier to hold. Commercial handles are available that enhance the grip of your toothbrush. Alternatively, special self-hardening plastic putty may be put onto the handle and moulded to your grip. A low-cost solution is to pierce a tennis ball at its poles and thread your toothbrush onto this to grip it more easily. Your dentist may be able to help with these modifications. An occupational therapist can also help.



What care do my dentures need?

- Dentures should be removed from the mouth and rinsed after every meal
- They should be cleaned completely twice daily, using a soft toothbrush or denture brush and a mild soap
- Your gums need to rest from wearing dentures every day. Soak your dentures overnight in a glass of water which contains a commercial denture cleaner.



What can I do about bad breath?

Keep your breath fresh by cleaning your teeth twice daily. Make sure your gums are healthy too. It is important to clean in between teeth and gums. You can also use anti-bacterial mouthwash. If you continue to suffer from bad breath, seek advice from your dentist.

What I can I do about having a dry mouth?

Certain medical conditions and medications such as antihistamines, painkillers, high blood pressure medications, diuretics, antidepressants and others can reduce saliva flow and make your mouth dry. If you wear dentures your mouth can be more prone to irritation.

If you suffer from a dry mouth it is important to follow strict oral hygiene practices. Avoid drinking sweetened drinks, especially between meals. Instead drink plenty of water. Products are also available to restore moisture in your mouth.

How do I go to the dentist if I am housebound?

Some dentists offer home visits for limited dental services. St John Ambulance may be able to arrange ambulance transport to your local dentist. This service has a cost. Other transport options may be the Total Mobility taxi voucher scheme, or community transport. Ask your local Age Concern what is available in your area.



Further information

Age Concern New Zealand

www.ageconcern.org.nz

Healthy Mouth, Healthy Ageing: Oral Health Guide for Caregivers of Older People published by the New Zealand Dental Association

www.healthysmiles.org.nz

Senior Services (Work and Income) – 0800 559 009

www.workandincome.govt.nz

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Serving the needs of older people