

# What is Smiles For Seniors?

- A program to educate on the importance of good oral hygiene for older adults
- A resource of information and services to help maintain and/or improve oral health of semi-dependent and other older adults

# DID YOU KNOW?

Assistance with daily oral hygiene is often needed for older adults with loss of strength, mobility or dexterity, or with other functional loss.

# **This program will serve:**

**Semi-dependent and other older adults  
in the following environments:**

- Living independently
- Needing partial or full caregiver assistance
- In assisted living
- Adult day care
- Short term rehab
- Long-term care

# **This program will also serve:**

## **Those concerned about the health and wellness of aging adults:**

- Family members and other caregivers
- Social service/state, city or county agencies or other such groups with programs that focus on needs of aging adults
- In-home health care professionals
- Those caring for residents of long-term care facilities

# This program covers:

- What causes or contributes to dental decay in older adults
- Common signs of dental disease
- Health conditions that can make oral hygiene a challenge rather than a routine
- Dry mouth
- Other possible side effects of medications

- How to make daily oral care easier
- Dentures
- Nutrition
- Tobacco
- Oral cancer and oral healthcare for the cancer patient

# DID YOU KNOW?

The link between good oral health and good overall health is strong. The U.S. Surgeon General and numerous other health associations continue to spread the message that “oral health is essential to general health and well-being ...”

# The oral and overall health connection:

- Dental disease is believed to be linked with medical conditions such as:
  - cardiac disease
  - diabetes
  - stroke
- Pain from dental disease can affect the older adult's desire or ability to eat, and thus can cause poor nutrition

# What causes or contributes to dental decay in an older adult:

- Inability to brush or floss
- Tobacco use
- Poor nutrition
- Some medical diseases
- Dry mouth
- Previous history of cavities
- Not visiting the dentist

**Remember, if there are no regular visits to the dentist and a daily oral hygiene routine is not followed – the older adult can be prone to gum disease and tooth decay.**

**This can hurt the ability to eat, and also can have a harmful effect on overall health.**

# Possible signs of tooth or gum decay:

- Verbal complaints or visible expressions of pain
- Visible tooth decay
- Bleeding gums
- Persistent bad breath
- Stained teeth
- Filmmy or dull looking teeth

- Mouth swelling
- Not eating
- Difficulty chewing
- Not putting dentures in the mouth
- Loose teeth

**If the older adult is not able to communicate, caregivers should carefully look in the mouth for visible signs of tooth decay**

# Health conditions that can make oral hygiene a challenge:

- Arthritis, stroke, Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, tremors, etc.
- Frailty or other disease affecting coordination
- Can't keep mouth open ... could be from weakness after stroke or illness, dementia, or temporomandibular joint problems

- Visual impairments
- Difficulty swallowing
- Dementia or cognitive impairments – these adults may forget to brush or not brush adequately. May also show resistance to oral hygiene care.

# Dry mouth is common in older adults:

- Dry mouth is often a side effect of more than 400 prescription and over-the-counter medications. Alcohol use and some cancer therapies can also contribute to dry mouth.
- Sjogrens Syndrome, an auto-immune disease, also causes dry mouth
- Dry mouth can contribute to tooth decay.

## **Symptoms of dry mouth can include:**

- lack of saliva
- bad breath
- mouth infection
- plaque
- mouth is sticky or dry
- burning mouth
- thick or stringy saliva
- tongue is rough/dry
- cracked lips and/or sores
- difficulty talking, chewing, swallowing

# How to ease symptoms of dry mouth:

- Ask the dentist or physician if the medication or dose can be changed to help ease dry mouth
- Use artificial saliva products
- Avoid caffeine, tobacco and alcohol
- Drink plenty of water
- Suck on sugar-free candies or chew sugar-free gum

# Some medications can also cause:

- Swollen or bleeding gums
- Fungal infections such as thrush (inhalers)
- Weakness – older adult may be too tired to care about oral hygiene
- Tooth decay – syrupy or sugary medications

# Advise dentist and physician of all drugs and their side effects

- Important to know before any surgery, including oral surgery
- List all medications, dosage and frequency
- Herbals, supplements and vitamins should be included in list

**Remember, tobacco and alcohol are considered drugs!**

# How to make daily oral care easier

Stress the importance of regular visits to dentist:

- at least twice a year
- once a year for those with dentures
- oral cancer screening

# Stress daily oral care routine

- Brush twice a day
- Floss regularly
- Fluoride toothpaste or supplements by DDS
- Alcohol free mouthwash or rinse is best
- Products prescribed by dentist; e.g., fluoride gel or an anti-bacterial rinse (chlorhexidine gluconate) for older adults at risk for dental disease

# Can older adult do his or her own daily mouth care?

- Can the older adult hold the toothbrush?
- Squeeze a tube of toothpaste?
- Floss?

**If the older adult can perform these tasks easily and at least twice a day – simply continue to encourage this daily routine – and his or her independence in performing these tasks. Assist when needed.**

# **But if the older adult has difficulty brushing, consider:**

- **Is tooth or gum disease causing pain?**
  - Visit the dentist
  - Ensure daily oral hygiene for prevention
- **Are physical limitations making it harder?**
  - Can caregiver or health professional help?
  - Adaptive oral care products can make the routine easier

# Simple and inexpensive ways to make daily oral hygiene easier for the adult to do independently:

## **Make the toothbrush handle larger by:**

- sliding it into a rubber bicycle handlebar grip
- wrapping toothbrush handle with aluminum foil

- carefully cutting a slit into a tennis ball and putting toothbrush handle in it

**Use a floss holder to easily get between teeth**

**Use toothpaste pump dispenser instead of tube**

# If assisting older adult with oral hygiene:

- Position patient and caregiver comfortably
- Have oral care products, water and towel nearby
- Be in a room with good lighting and mirror
- Wear gloves (face mask and protective eyewear, if needed) for infection control

- Explain and show each step to the older adult
- Keep to a daily routine, same time, same place
- Be patient and caring, give positive feedback
- Don't rush

# For a resistant patient:

- Is tooth or gum pain causing the resistance?
- Is there a language barrier?
- Let family know if adult is resistant or combative
- Ask the dentist or physician if a mouth prop could help
- Create a bond with the older adult

- Distract the person with music, give a favorite object to hold (photo, stuffed animal)
- Be soothing and do not rush
- Respect and ensure privacy
- If person is able to, let him or her help with oral hygiene

# Does the person wear dentures?

- Those with dentures need daily oral hygiene to keep the gums and remaining teeth healthy – and to preserve dentures:
  - Clean all surfaces of dentures
  - Clean gums and any remaining teeth
  - Label dentures and denture cup ... important if older adult is in shared living environment

- Denture wearers also need regular dental examinations to:
  - ensure dentures are in good shape
  - check any remaining teeth
  - undergo soft tissue oral cancer exam

# A healthy diet will help keep the mouth and body healthy

- Daily diet should include five food groups recommended by USDA:
    - Meat & Beans
    - Grains
    - Milk
    - Fruits
    - Vegetables
- Source: [MyPyramid.gov](http://MyPyramid.gov)
- Avoid or limit alcohol
  - Limit soft drinks, even sugar-free
    - acid effects
    - sugar effects

# Other nutritional considerations:

- Is multi-vitamin or supplement needed?
- Avoid high-sugar, starchy foods.
- Poor nutrition can hurt oral health.

# Do you suspect older adult is not eating regularly? Determine why not.

- Tooth or mouth pain
- Problems with dentures
- Limited income
- Homebound, can't get groceries
- Illness, including dementias
- Loneliness, depression
- Alcoholism

# Try to ensure regular meals are provided to the older adult:

- Inform family or caregiver if you think older adult is not eating regular or balanced meals
- Check out city, county or state agencies that serve elderly and offer in-home meal delivery
- If affordable, hire professional caregiving service to assist with meal preparation

# **90 percent of oral cancer patients use tobacco products!**

**Cigarettes, cigars, pipes and smokeless tobacco increase risk for:**

- gum disease
- bad breath
- reduced sense of taste and smell
- leukoplakia (early symptom of oral cancer)
- oral cancer
- delayed healing after surgery

# Resources to help quit

- Dentist or physician
- American Cancer Society
- American Lung Association
- Ohio Tobacco Quit Line

# Risk for oral cancer increases with age

- More than half of oral cancer patients are 65 years or older
- Tobacco and excessive alcohol use can increase risk for oral cancer
- Older adults should undergo regular oral cancer soft tissue exams by dentist
- Oral cancer is often painless in early stages

- Oral cancer can start in any area of oral cavity
- Often starts as tiny white or red spot
- Left undiagnosed, it will probably grow

### **Other symptoms can include:**

- mouth sore that doesn't heal, or bleeds easily
- change in color of mouth tissues
- lump, crusty or rough spot in mouth
- problems chewing, swallowing, moving jaw or tongue

# Treatment for any cancer has own set of issues related to oral health

- Important to see dentist before beginning chemotherapy or other cancer treatment
  - See dentist two weeks before treatment starts
  - Check for (and treat) oral infection

- **Possible side effects from cancer treatment:**
  - Increased risk for oral infections
  - Dry mouth
  - Tooth decay
  - Swelling and ulcers of the membranes
  - Problems with tongue

# Keep mouth healthy during cancer treatments:

- Drink water, suck on ice chips
- Use artificial saliva products for dry mouth
- Suck sugar-free candies or chew sugarless gum
- Alcohol-free mouthrinse only

- Avoid alcohol or tobacco – these dry the mouth
- Brush teeth, gums and tongue daily – a super soft brush may be easier
- Stay away from sugary foods and beverages that could cause tooth decay.
- If dentures are hurting or don't fit, see dentist