



Nova Scotia Dental Association

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Kids, Teens & Seniors

Our oral health needs and responsibilities change as we grow and get older. Although the importance of brushing and flossing remains constant - there are special considerations for each demographic to consider. From adolescence to adulthood and everywhere in between, good oral health is important for good overall health.

Children and Infants

Ensuring your child has a healthy smile starts at a young age. Baby teeth are the building blocks for healthy teeth for life. Not only are baby teeth needed to help children chew and speak properly, but their roots help guide the proper growth and positioning of permanent (adult) teeth as they grow in.

Between six and ten months of age most infants begin to get their baby teeth. They are called baby teeth because this first set of teeth lasts through early childhood until they are replaced with permanent (adult) teeth. This process starts at about age six.

Although baby teeth fall out and get replaced by permanent teeth, they are vital to your child's oral development. As baby teeth come in, foods requiring chewing and biting are introduced into a child's diet. These foods provide nutrition as children grow.

Baby teeth are also important in helping children reach speech milestones. The tongue and teeth are key to forming sounds and making words.

Astonishingly, childhood cavities are the most common chronic childhood disease – but no need to worry, with proper oral hygiene, a good balanced diet and regular consultation with the dentist, it's completely preventable.

Permanent teeth form in the jawbone and eventually push out the baby teeth. Properly maintained baby teeth help act as a space maintainer to guide permanent teeth into the correct position.

First tooth, first visit!

It's important to start a child's relationship with a dentist at the right time to build a life-long relationship with good oral health. Generally, a child's first visit to the dentist should be either when the first tooth erupts (comes through the gums) or by the age of one. The dentist will then determine a schedule for treatment based on what they see. When children can tie their shoes or colour between the lines, they will usually be able to brush on their own. Until then, adult guidance and supervision is suggested.

The IWK Health Centre in Halifax has excellent resource available for new parents, including the [Loving Care Series](#) available online.

You can find the dedicated oral health care section starting on page 88 (109 of .pdf document).

Teenagers

Although teenagers are not the only age group susceptible to some of these lifestyle choices, it's important they are educated on the health risks and responsibilities that go along with growing up and becoming an adult.

Alcohol and binge drinking:

The sugar and acid in most forms of alcohol attack tooth enamel and put you at a higher risk of more serious oral health issues such as oral cancer. Going to bed without properly brushing your teeth can cause serious damage.

Vomiting also coats your teeth in tooth-eroding stomach acid— and should be avoided for a number of health related reasons including tooth erosion.

Smoking:

It should come as no surprise that smoking has been linked to multiple forms of cancer – including oral cancer. However, the effects of nicotine can often cause other serious issues as it can affect saliva production, and mask problematic symptoms of other oral health issues.

Drugs:

Over-the-counter, prescription and illegal drugs can create issues within the oral cavity – so they should not be taken without first consulting your dentist. Illegal drugs in particular can cause grinding, dry mouth, gum disease and tooth decay without proper oral health care.

Oral Sex:

Like any important decision in your life, you should be aware of the risks and protective measures before deciding to participate in oral sex. Oral sex can enable the transmission of the Human Papilloma Virus HPV – which in rare cases can lead to the development of oral cancer in both men and woman.

Lip and tongue piercing:

Before partaking in a lip or tongue piercing, you should first consult your family dentist for an overview of potential issues it may cause to your oral health care.

Lip and tongue piercings can cause chipped teeth, damaged gums, and swelling or nerve damage. It's recommended to visit your dentist every 6 months to monitor the health and safety of any oral piercings you may already have.

Seniors

Check Out [healthyteeth/plus](#) for everything you need to know on seniors oral health care. In generations past – as we aged there was an expectation to begin to lose our teeth - but more and more of today's seniors have reached their golden years with many or all their adult teeth intact. In fact, this cohort is the first to expect to keep their teeth for a lifetime. But to maintain this positive trend, seniors need to be aware of specific oral health concerns so maintaining their teeth can be a realistic goal.

Oral hygiene is important to remove harmful bacteria and plaque from the teeth, gums and dentures to keep the mouth healthy. For seniors and their caregivers, it can be challenging to maintain daily mouth care, but it is important as decay and infection can develop quickly. A healthy mouth supports good general health and overall well-being.

In Nova Scotia, the oral health care delivery model is generally delivered from a dentist's office. Dental offices are designed to allow mobility and access for seniors and other patients. Call ahead to your dentist to ensure your particular needs can be addressed.

A great number of questions arise about caring for the oral health for seniors – including questions such as do I still need to worry about cavities, do I need to clean my dentures, or do I still need to visit a dentist even though I have false teeth? The short answer to all of these questions and many other questions involving the oral health care of seniors is YES – maintaining good oral health care is important for maintaining good overall health care of all individuals young or old.

Other questions can also arise such as does my risk of oral cancer increase with age, or am I more susceptible to temperature sensitivity? Does my dentist know how to handle patients with dementia or other physical or mental illnesses or medications? All of these questions are valuable and can be answered simply by you or a caregiver contacting your dentist.

Medications

Medications can impact your dental health. Each time you visit your dentist, be sure to provide your complete, up-to-date information about any recent medication changes, hospitalizations or surgery, illnesses and/or any changes in your health since your last dental visit. It's helpful to bring a written list of the drug, dosage and frequency of use. Include any over-the-counter products you may be using as well as any herbal products and supplements.

Implants and Dental Bridges

Dental implants are replacement tooth roots. Implants provide a strong foundation for fixed (permanent) or removable replacement teeth that are made to match your natural teeth.

Not everyone is a candidate for dental implants. Patients should have healthy gums and enough bone to hold the implant. Heavy smokers, people with diabetes or heart disease, or those who have had radiation therapy on the head-neck area need to be evaluated on an individual basis.

A bridge involves one or more false teeth that are permanently held in place by surrounding healthy, natural teeth. Fitting you with a Dental Bridge begins with your dentist filing and shaping the surrounding teeth. A dental laboratory prepares the Dental Bridge to fit into the space your dentist has prepared. Fitting and placing the Dental Bridge can take several appointments with your dentist or a dental specialist called a Prosthodontist.

Reduced Dexterity

As we get older, it is not unusual to suffer from reduced manual dexterity – or issues such as arthritis. The easiest solution may be the use of an electric or battery powered toothbrush. You can also adapt your manual toothbrush to make using it easier. To help increase the grip size, insert the handle into a rubber ball or bicycle grip. To increase the handle length, tape tongue depressors to it. Flossing can also be a challenge. There are various flossing aids available at your local drug store that can make things easier.

Cleaning Dentures and false teeth

Treat your partial or complete dentures in the same manner you would care for natural teeth. They should be cleaned each night and soak them in water. If there are any changes in the way your dentures fit your mouth you should see a dental professional. Be sure to use toothpaste specifically designed for dentures, to avoid scratching the surface. Scratches can allow bacteria to hide and flourish.

Never use household bleach or cleaners to clean dentures.

Brushing Up on Mouth Care

This interdisciplinary project (involving dentistry, health professions, medicine, nursing, health promotion, government and NSCC, Capital Health partners) was funded by the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation. It is part of the decade of ongoing research on the oral health of older adults in Nova Scotia.

Together, the Brushing Up on Mouth Care project is exploring the broad spectrum of influences on daily mouth care in long-term care and through this research, are establishing a formal process for integrating oral care into organizational policy and practice.

More information is available including instructional videos on the [Brushing Up on Mouth Care website](#).