Your Family’s Oral Health
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The Importance of Oral Health

Your mouth is one of the first places medical professionals look when searching for symptoms of disease. More than 120 diseases show early symptoms in the mouth and may be first detected by a dental exam. Periodontal (gum) disease is the body’s response to bacteria in the mouth and many health issues may be linked to these infections. For example:

- Stroke, heart disease and low birth weight can all be linked to gum disease.\(^2,3\)
- 90 percent of systemic diseases have some type of oral manifestation.\(^4\)
- Infections in the mouth can lead to infections in major organs.\(^5\)
- Poor mouth care may lead to oral cancer.\(^6\)

The mouth and body connection

Taking care of your gums is especially important if you have any of the following four conditions:

**Diabetes** — Increased sugar levels have a negative impact on oral health by increasing the risk of cavities, gum disease and tooth loss. Diabetics who have gum disease find it more difficult to control their sugar levels because the infections may cause increased blood sugar levels.\(^7\)

**Pregnancy** — Pregnant women with gum disease may be much more likely to have a baby born too early or too small. Research indicates that a labor-inducing biological fluid is found in oral bacteria. This fluid increases with gum disease, therefore increasing the risk of pre-term, low birth weight babies.\(^8\)

**High-Risk Heart Conditions** — Individuals with certain high-risk heart conditions have an increased risk of oral bacteria infections. Infective endocarditis occurs when bacteria from the mouth enters the bloodstream through small injuries that occur during brushing, flossing or eating.\(^5\)

**Cancer Treatment** — Radiation and chemotherapy can have direct effects on salivary glands and oral tissues resulting in increased risk for oral pain, infections and cavities. Research has shown these side effects can be avoided or reduced with diligent oral care and through participation by a dental team in the cancer treatment.\(^9\)

It’s important to remember to include your dental team in your care if you are experiencing any of the above conditions.
The Role of Dental Benefits

Regular dentist visits are important to maintaining your overall health. For the rest of this brochure, we’ll take a look at how oral health and overall health affect your family during different stages of their lives. Remember that educating yourself about oral health and having and using a dental benefits plan doesn’t focus on fixing problems, but preventing them instead.

Routine dental visits are crucial to good health

Preventive dental care not only provides benefits when you have issues with your teeth and gums, but can also assist in the early detection of health-threatening conditions. Choosing dental coverage, and using those benefits, can go a long way to keeping you and your family healthy.

The dental benefits leader

Delta Dental of Virginia has provided dental benefits for more than 50 years. And we have the largest network of dentists nationwide, so it’s likely that your current dentist already participates with us.

We’ve put all our efforts into providing quality, cost-effective dental care for people just like you and have brought smiles to more than two million Virginians. When considering a dental benefits carrier, consider the expert in dental benefits, Delta Dental.

For oral health resources, to search for a provider in your area, or to find important oral health information, visit us on the web at DeltaDentalVA.com.
Babies

Babies’ oral health is easily overlooked due to their young age, but tooth decay begins soon after the first teeth appear. Frequent exposure to sugary liquids, such as milk, formula, fruit juice and soda, can feed the bacteria on a baby’s teeth and gums, resulting in plaque buildup. Below are just a few easy ways you can improve the oral health of your baby:

• Never let your baby fall asleep with a bottle.
• Wean your baby from the bottle as soon as they can drink from a cup.
• Clean your baby’s gums once a day with a moistened cloth by gently massaging teeth and gums.

Teething

Teething may begin as early as three months. The gums around the emerging teeth may be swollen and tender. Sometimes a cyst may appear at the site of the new tooth, but cysts are usually not painful for children. Give your baby firm objects to chew on — teething rings or hard, unsweetened teething crackers. Frozen teething toys should not be used; extreme cold can injure your baby’s mouth and cause more discomfort.

Oral pain relievers applied to gums may not be helpful as a teething baby drools so much that the medication is washed away. Pediatricians also warn such medications can numb the back of the throat and interfere with your baby’s ability to swallow. If your baby is uncomfortable, talk to your pediatrician about a course of action.

The first tooth

When the first tooth appears, brush your baby’s teeth gently with a soft toothbrush and a smear of fluoride toothpaste. About six months after the first tooth breaks the surface, it’s time to schedule a dentist appointment.

Pain, infection and extraction of teeth can result if tooth decay is left untreated, while problems like speech difficulty and crooked teeth may develop later.

Make sure your child has healthy baby teeth, and healthy permanent teeth usually follow.
Children should see a dentist regularly, but parents need to help with brushing and flossing while they are at a young age. Show children how to brush and floss, letting them do it themselves and then finishing yourself, to remove all plaque. Usually by age five, children are able to be responsible for their own oral health routine.

Your child’s first dental visit

By the time your child reaches age one, they may be ready for their first dental visit. Eliminate surprises by asking your dentist what a first appointment is like. Then talk to your child about what to expect. Remember to bring your child’s medical records to the appointment. The first dental visit may include:

- An examination of the teeth, jaw, bite, gums and oral tissues and a gentle cleaning to remove plaque
- An assessment of the need for fluoride
- X-rays (depending on age) and a discussion on whether sealants are a good option

If your child becomes uncooperative, you might consider a series of short, successive visits, which can help build trust in the dentist and ease anxiety for future visits.

Why fluoride?

Fluoride’s ability to inhibit or even reverse the progression of dental caries (tooth decay) is well-documented. Especially when use is begun early in a child’s oral health routine. The success of water fluoridation in preventing and controlling dental caries led to the development of fluoride-containing products such as toothpaste and mouthrinse.

Avoiding sugary drinks

The consumption of sugary drinks, such as soda and juice, in the United States has increased over the last 30 years among children and adults. Sugary drinks have been linked to poor diet quality, weight gain, obesity and type 2 diabetes. It is important to start your child on healthy alternatives to sugary foods and drinks early so they learn healthy behaviors while they’re young.

Healthy habits begin at home, so teaching children good oral habits and to avoid sugar early on will help them develop healthy habits for years to come.
Children

Cavities are almost entirely preventable, yet they remain the single most common, chronic childhood disease — five times more common than asthma. Luckily, there are a few easy ways you can help improve your child’s oral health:

Brushing tips to improve your child’s oral health

• Use a soft-bristled toothbrush to reach every surface of each tooth.

• Replace your child’s toothbrush every three months, when bristles are frayed or after your child has been sick.

• To clean the outside surfaces of teeth, position the brush at a 45-degree angle where gums and teeth meet. Use short, gentle strokes in a circular motion.

• For inside surfaces of your child’s upper and lower front teeth, hold the brush vertically. Use gentle back-and-forth strokes over teeth and gum tissue.

• For better flossing, insert floss between teeth using a back-and-forth motion. Curve floss into a C-shape against one tooth and then the other.

Children and sealants

While brushing and flossing regularly go a long way to improving oral health, sealants are another proven way to prevent cavities. A dental sealant is an invisible plastic coating applied by your dentist to your child’s teeth. The American Dental Association recommends sealants as powerful weapons against decay.16,17

Sealants are usually applied to the chewing surface of back teeth, where most cavities develop.17 If bacteria can’t penetrate a tooth’s enamel, they can’t multiply and cause decay.16 Recent research shows that sealants not only protect healthy teeth, but also can actually stop decay in its beginning stages, preventing future cavities.16

Applying the sealant is a quick and simple process. There is very little discomfort, if any, and your child will be able to eat immediately afterward.16

Effective oral health habits and methods to prevent cavities, when started early, will stay with your children for years to come — and may help prevent costly, future oral health issues.
Teenagers’ lifestyle habits, such as their diet and their intent to express themselves, may have a lasting impact on the health of their teeth and gums, and the rest of their body. Many teens use quick meals and carbonated beverages to stay on the move, but sugar-loaded drinks and foods may have irreversible effects on oral health. Teenagers also look for interesting ways to express themselves, such as oral piercings, or they may not view braces or protective sports gear as a welcome addition to their appearance. Here is some information you can give your teen on the benefits and the risks of these choices.

Sodas, sugar and their effects on teen bodies
Carbonated beverages may be behind an increase in cavities for today’s teens. Studies show acids in these drinks break down tooth enamel, which may lead to extensive dental treatments and, eventually, tooth loss. Additionally, phosphoric acid (found in regular and diet sodas) may reduce bone density. By age 16, girls have accumulated 90 to 97 percent of their bone mass, yet only 19 percent of girls ages nine to 19 are getting the recommended daily allowance of calcium.

Piercings and oral health risks
This fashion statement may create a number of potential oral health risks, such as infection from bacteria in the mouth or damage to teeth from the metal jewelry.

When to get braces
Braces do more than improve your smile — they also help with dental function. Crooked or crowded teeth can make it hard to brush and floss and, over time, can lead to tooth decay, gum disease and tooth loss. Your dentist may recommend a visit to an orthodontist if they feel that braces are necessary.

Sports and teeth
Preventing accidents is not always possible, but following basic safety guidelines can help guard against injuries. If your child plays high-impact sports such as hockey, basketball or soccer, buy a faceguard or mouth guard for practices and games.

Talk to your teen about the long-term effects of sugary drinks and foods and protect them against oral injuries to be sure they’ll have a healthy smile now and for years to come.
Men

There are many oral health issues that are specific to men. Data show that men do less for their oral health and are much less likely than women to visit the dentist. This is despite the fact that most common oral diseases and oral health conditions are easy to prevent.

Men’s oral health:

• 34 percent of men age 30 to 54 have periodontitis (gum disease), compared to 23 percent of women.20

• 56 percent of men age 55 to 90 have periodontitis, compared to 44 percent of women.20

• 33 percent of men have not had a medical checkup in the past year.20

Periodontal disease (gum disease) in men

Periodontal disease occurs when untreated plaque hardens into tartar, causing a breakdown of the gum fibers that hold gums tightly to teeth. Periodontal disease can have serious health consequences. See your dentist if you experience loose or separating teeth, persistent bad breath, or red, swollen or bleeding gums.

Medication and oral health

Men are more likely to suffer from heart attacks, and are more likely to be on medications that cause dry mouth, which increases the risk of cavities. Certain blood pressure medications and antidepressants may also have similar side effects.

Smoking and men’s oral health

If you use tobacco products such as cigarettes or smokeless tobacco, you are at an increased risk for periodontal disease and oral cancers.21 If oral cancer is left untreated, it can spread, leading to facial disfigurement due to surgery, chronic pain and even death. More than 34,000 people will be diagnosed with oral cancer and 8,000 die each year from oral and pharyngeal (throat) diseases, so if you smoke or use tobacco products, it’s important to see a dentist regularly.5

If you take steps to improve brushing and visit your dentist regularly, you may avoid many oral, or overall health conditions.
Women

For every stage of a woman’s life there are unique health challenges to consider. Oral health is no exception, as it is affected by changes in habits and hormones that only women may experience.

Oral health and puberty
During puberty, a surge in hormones may cause swollen gums, especially during menstruation. Mouth lesions and ulcers can also develop, and girls may experience sensitive gums that are more easily irritated.22

Contraceptives and medication
Oral contraceptives may promote gingivitis since they mimic pregnancy and contain progesterone or estrogen. Women who use birth control pills are more likely to develop a dry socket after tooth extraction and should consult their dentist before scheduling major dental procedures.22 Diet pills and certain medications can decrease salivary flow, putting adults at risk for cavities or gum disease.

Pregnancy and periodontal disease
Pregnancy may increase inflammation of the gums, and if plaque isn’t removed regularly, gingivitis can occur that may lead to periodontitis. Studies indicate that women with periodontal disease may be at risk for pre-term, low birth weight babies. Morning sickness may also cause tooth erosion due to increased acid from vomiting. To neutralize the acid, rub a paste of baking soda and water on the teeth.22

Menopause and oral health
When menopause begins, some women experience dry mouth, burning sensations in their gums and changes in taste. Gums can become sore and sensitive, and hormone replacement therapy may cause gums to bleed, swell and become red.

Smoking in women
If you use tobacco products, you are at an increased risk for periodontal disease and oral cancers.12 Oral cancer, when left untreated, may lead to life-threatening consequences, so it’s even more important to see the dentist regularly if you use tobacco.4

Women are often the caregivers of the family, but it is important to recognize the reasons to care for your own health as well.
Seniors

Older adults may have dental concerns that can’t be taken care of with just brushing, flossing and regular cleanings. Your dentist may have talked with you about just a few of the following dental health issues that arise later in life and the importance of keeping up with healthy oral habits you learned a long time ago.

How to care for dentures

Dentures may make your mouth less sensitive to hot foods and liquids. They may also make it more difficult to notice bones or other harmful objects in your food.

Dentures need to be kept clean and free of food particles to keep your mouth healthy and to prevent discoloration. According to the American Dental Association, you should take care of your dentures as you would natural teeth. Brush daily and visit your dentist regularly. When you go to sleep, remove your dentures and put them in water or a denture-cleaning liquid. Partial dentures should be cared for in the same way.

Dry mouth in older adults

This occurs when the salivary glands do not make enough saliva. You may have difficulty swallowing, tasting or even speaking. Dry mouth is a common problem among older adults, but it is not a normal part of aging. Many medications and certain medical conditions can cause it, including diabetes, Sjögren’s and Parkinson’s disease.

Keep up old oral health habits

The problems your dentist warned you about as a child should still concern you. Cavities and gum disease are things to watch for throughout your life. To protect against these lifelong concerns, keep up these good dental habits:

- Brush your teeth gently at least twice a day and floss at least daily.
- Drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste.
- Visit your dentist regularly.
- Avoid tobacco.

You can keep your teeth and gums in shape by continuing good dental care into your later years.
Make your Dental Benefits Matter

When choosing dental coverage, the decision to choose Delta Dental of Virginia couldn’t be easier. Delta Dental has provided dental benefits for more than 50 years. We’ve put all our efforts into providing quality, cost-effective dental care for people just like you and have brought smiles to millions of Virginians with:

- One of the largest networks of participating dentists, which means your current dentist may already participate with us
- Advanced dental benefits covering preventive, basic and major dental services
- Award-winning customer service representatives who answer questions quickly and efficiently
- Additional benefits for individuals with certain high-risk conditions
- 24/7 access to your benefits information at DeltaDentalVA.com and through the Delta Dental mobile app

Through innovative programs and services, a customer-service center ranked second in the country, a full suite of dental benefits, plus oral health resources, Delta Dental is committed to keeping you as healthy as possible.

Choose the benefits of experience and let Delta Dental of Virginia give you something to smile about.
Sources


