



# Dental Care for Older Adults: 101

**Our needs change as we age - dental care is no exception.**

## Changing Needs

It's no secret that our bodies change as we get older. We find ourselves at higher risks for many medical issues ranging from numerous types of cancer to osteoporosis, our mental clarity may start declining, not to mention our backs can get thrown out just by sneezing! With all of these bodily changes, it should be no surprise that changes are also occurring in our mouths.

As we begin reaching more advanced years, we may notice:

- **Dry Mouth** – whether naturally occurring due to hormonal changes or as a medication side effect, dry mouth can increase the risk of tooth decay and gum disease, fungal infections, difficulty speaking/eating, or issues wearing dentures
- **Attrition** – this natural wearing-down of tooth enamel from simply using your teeth to eat can increase the risk of tooth decay
- **Tooth Discoloration** – though naturally-occurring attrition can account for some discoloration and changes to the dentin inside our teeth, teeth may also be stained due to food, drink, and tobacco usage
- **Diseases** – the risks of developing thrush (fungal infection) or oral cancers become higher as we age
- **Gum Recession** – gums may naturally recede as we age, exposing more of the tooth root, which increases the risk of cavities on the roots of your teeth
- **Reduced Sense of Taste** – this can be caused by medications or dentures
- **Gum Disease** – this is most frequently caused by plaque buildup, however can also be caused by diabetes or cancer
- **Jaw Misalignment** – this is most typical if teeth are lost/extracted, but the gaps are not filled with a partial, bridge, or implant, allowing remaining teeth to drift
- **Bone Density Loss** – the risk of osteoporosis increases with age (especially post-menopause), and with it, decreased bone density; decreased bone density may cause teeth to become loose



## Oral Care and Insurance

Many dental insurance plans cover routine services, like cleanings and exams, in full.

If you are planning on visiting a new dentist, make sure to call your insurance plan to confirm that the dentist is in your network and to ensure that the maximum insurance benefit will be paid for your services. Similarly, it is recommended to check with your insurance to verify your benefits prior to starting any planned dental work to ensure coverage.

## What Can Be Done to Maintain Oral Health?

Regardless of age, there are certain things we should all do to maintain good oral hygiene:

- Brush with Fluoride Toothpaste – brush for at least two minutes, twice a day and floss at least once daily
- Visit the Dentist Regularly – visits should be every six months, unless otherwise directed by the dentist; denture wearers should also visit the dentist regularly so gum health can be monitored and dentures adjusted as needed
- Eat a balanced diet
- Avoid tobacco products
- Stay Hydrated – drinking water regularly throughout the day can help combat dry mouth
- Increase Fluoride Usage – though fluoride is commonly added to drinking water, it is also frequently added to toothpaste and mouthwash; fluoride helps prevent decay by re-mineralizing tooth enamel that has been weakened due to naturally occurring acids in the mouth
- Use an Antibacterial Mouthwash – this will help kill bacteria in the mouth, reducing plaque buildup

## Dentures and Partials

False teeth like dentures or partials require some special care to maintain good overall and oral health. For example, denture wearers should leave their dentures out for at least 6 hours per day, avoid letting the denture/partial dry-out by soaking them in warm (not hot!) water overnight, and allowing any gum sores to heal before putting the denture/partial in.

Those who wear dentures or partials should also:

- Clean the denture/partial daily, rinsing away food particles and gently brushing all surfaces of the denture/partial with a special denture brush or soft-bristled toothbrush
- Gently brush your teeth, gums, tongue, and roof of your mouth before putting in the denture/partial
- Visit the dentist regularly for exams, to address any adjustments that may be needed to fix ill-fitting dentures/partial, or to replace the denture/partial as needed (about every five years)

## Dental Care and Arthritis

Those suffering from arthritis may find dental care particularly challenging. Using toothbrushes, floss holders, and other dental products that are specially designed for those with arthritis can help ease the pain. Otherwise, many people try wrapping the handle of their manual toothbrush with a sponge or pushing the handle through a foam ball to improve the grip.

Using an electric toothbrush can also be helpful, as the handle tends to be thicker (easier to grip) and it does most of the brushing for you, which is helpful for those with limited shoulder mobility.



For more oral health information, please visit our website at [www.bcbsfedental.com](http://www.bcbsfedental.com).



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