

Healthy You

FAST FACTS FOR YOUR HEALTH

5 Dental Conditions that Affect Older Adults

The number of American adults 65 and older is expected to reach 98 million by 2060 —that’s nearly a quarter of the total population.¹ Aging adults nowadays have fewer dental health issues that in previous generations, thanks to widespread water fluorination, better dental treatment and improved preventive dental education. However, older adults still face an increased risk for certain oral health issues.

Here, we outline five dental problems that tend to increase with age and what you can do to minimize your risk.

1. **Dry mouth:** Aging increases your risk of other health conditions, many of which require medication to manage. All medications bear the risk of side effects, and some drugs can cause dry mouth. Dry mouth can lead to several other oral health problems, including increasing your risk for tooth decay.
2. **Tooth decay:** Cavities affect people of all ages, and the older you are, the more likely you are to have some tooth decay. Tooth decay is common, and your dentist can detect it and easily treat it before it becomes a larger problem. However, if you don’t see your dentist, your tooth decay can progress and become severely infected. Researchers estimate that 20% of people age 65 years or older have untreated tooth decay.¹
3. **Tooth loss:** Tooth loss was practically inevitable in past generations of older adults, but improved access to dental care has reduced its prevalence. Today, about a quarter of all adults 75 and older have lost all of their teeth, whereas half as many people (13%) between the ages of 65 and 74 have complete tooth loss.¹
4. **Gum disease:** Gum disease is a common oral health concern in the aging population. In fact, 68% of people who are 65 or older have some form of gum disease.¹
5. **Oral cancer:** Most oral cancer is diagnosed in older adults. Fortunately, your dentist screens you for oral cancer at each preventive visit. Identifying oral cancer early increases the effectiveness of treatment.

Now What? Ways to Reduce Your Risk of Oral Health Problems

Aging comes with additional health concerns — oral health included. Fortunately, dental health does not need to suffer as you get older.

Twice-daily brushing, flossing and, if necessary, denture care remain crucial to keeping your teeth and mouth healthy and clean between dental visits. If you are struggling with certain aspects of dental care (such as comfortably gripping your toothbrush), talk to your dentist about products that can help you safely and comfortably continue your healthy dental habits at home.

Speaking of talking with your dentist, the twice-yearly preventive dental exams you've scheduled throughout your life continue to play a major role in minimizing your risk of oral health problems that are common in older adults.

Your dentist will help you safely navigate changing medication regimens, any at-home dental care challenges and help identify potential concerns early so you can take advantage of the least invasive and expensive treatment options.

Want more dental health information specifically for older Iowans?

Check out this Dental Health of Older Adults Infographic.

SOURCES

1. https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/basics/adult-oral-health/adult_older.htm
2. <https://www.deltadental.com/us/en/protect-my-smile/life-stages/oral-care-for-older-adults/older-adults-dont-brush-off-dental-care.html>

Live Longer and Better with Oral and Vision Health

It's not earth-shattering news: Taking proactive steps to preserve your health will ensure you don't just live longer but live better. However, as you age, it can be a challenge to maintain your health and wellness. Here, you'll get healthy living tips that you can start making habits today — and it's never too late to put these practices in place. Plus, you'll learn about efforts Delta Dental of Iowa has supported to help older Iowans access the care they need.

Get Stepping Toward Better Overall Health

Practicing good oral and vision health support the bigger picture — achieving optimal overall health. One of the simplest ways you can support your total health is to walk.

Check out the Healthiest State Annual Walk, which is a 30-minute walk held on the first Wednesday of October all across Iowa. Just 30 minutes of walking a day can improve your overall physical, social and emotional well-being.

Preventive Vision and Oral Health Tips

Walking is just one way to be healthier. No matter what your age, preventive health habits promote your oral health, vision health and overall health. A lifestyle that includes a healthful diet, regular exercise and a few preventive habits will afford you a better chance of a healthy bright smile and clear vision for the future.



Maintain your oral health through the years with these tips:

- Brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste twice a day and floss daily.
- Visit your dentist twice yearly for your regular dental checkup. Sticking to a twice-yearly schedule will ensure any big problems are detected early.
- Enjoy daily foods rich in calcium and vitamin D to maintain bone health and drink plenty of water.
- Engage in regular physical activity like walking, biking or strength training.
- Reduce your risk of oral cancer by avoiding excessive alcohol consumption, unprotected exposure to the sun and any tobacco use.

Maintain your vision health through the years with these tips:

- Keep regular eye exams with your eye doctor, even if you do not wear contact lenses, glasses or have vision problems. Talk to your eye doctor about how often you should have preventive exams, and keep him or her informed of any chronic health issues.
- Eating a balanced diet, enjoying regular exercise and drinking plenty of water helps provide the nutrients eyes need. On the flip side, smoking depletes your eyes of key nutrients, so quit smoking.
- Always wear UV-blocking sunglasses and broad brimmed hats to protect your vision while you're outside.
- Monitor your screen time and take breaks while working on your computer. Staring at TVs, smartphones, computers, and tablets can strain your eyes.
- If you're working on a home improvement project, wear certified safety glasses to prevent eye injuries.
- Get a good night's sleep. It helps keep your eyes moisturized and clean.

Supporting Lifelong Smiles

If you or older Iowan you know struggles to maintain their oral health care, we encourage you to learn more about the Lifelong Smiles Coalition, which is an Iowa-based organization aimed at providing older adults across the state with greater access to oral healthcare.

Although better preventive dental care, advances in dentistry and widespread water fluorination have improved Americans' oral health, many older adults struggle to keep regular dental visits and miss out on the dental care they need.

The Delta Dental of Iowa Foundation has supported the goals of the Lifelong Smiles Coalition by committed more than \$1.5 million to the organization since 2015. These projects developed oral health care training and education for dental teams and the direct care workforce, and continue to expand dental public health initiatives for older adults throughout Iowa.

Learn more about the Lifelong Smiles Coalition.

When it comes to your health, it's the little things you do each day that make the biggest difference over the long haul. Inspired to learn more? Delta Dental of Iowa has a wealth of resources to support the health of Iowans of all ages. Visit our blog, *A Healthy Life*, for more ideas on how to boost your own health and wellness.