

Senior Australians and oral health

Good oral health is vital for senior Australians' overall health, wellbeing and quality of life. The need for dental care increases as people age, but deteriorating health, cognition and mobility can leave them unable to maintain good dental hygiene and therefore more vulnerable to oral disease.

The elderly commonly experience the following conditions, which contribute to tooth loss:

- Tooth decay (dental caries)
- Gum disease (gingivitis, periodontal disease)
- Dry mouth (xerostomia), often as a side effect of taking medication.

These conditions can be prevented or managed through:

- Maintaining daily oral hygiene (with support, if needed)
- Regular visits to a dental practitioner for check-ups and preventive care
- Timely referrals for dental treatment
- Oral healthcare planning
- Routine oral health assessments, both before and after entering residential aged care.

Poor oral health can impact on:

- General health
- Speech
- Nutrition
- Sleep
- Behaviour
- Socialising.

Poor oral health can:

- Cause pain, discomfort and infections
- Lead to malnutrition, which can increase the risk of infection, falls and fractures
- Be linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and aspiration pneumonia
- Complicate management of illnesses such as diabetes, chronic heart failure and respiratory diseases.

Eating and drinking for good oral health

Limit consumption of sticky and sugary foods and drinks like biscuits, cakes, sweets, sugary tea, juices and cordials.

Eat nutritious snacks like fruit, yoghurt, cheese and vegetable sticks.

It's important to drink water after meals and snacks, and after taking medication.

Tap water should be the drink of choice – the fluoride in it protects against tooth decay.

How to maintain good oral health

1. Teeth should be brushed morning and night with a soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste
2. The teeth, gums and tongue should all be brushed
3. The mouth can be kept moist by regularly sipping or rinsing with water
4. Saliva substitutes can be used if necessary
5. Regular dental visits are important



Dentures

Dentures should be cleaned daily with a denture brush and mild liquid soap, not toothpaste.

Dentures should be stored overnight in cold water.

Regular dental examinations are important – dentures may need to be adjusted as the mouth changes shape and dentures wear.

Before moving into a residential aged care facility

A dental visit for assessment and treatment is recommended.

The dentist or GP should provide the facility with advice on any special oral care needs.

Oral health needs should be documented in the resident's Personal Care Plan.

Affordable dental extras should be maintained as part of the resident's private health insurance.

The Director of Nursing should be approached about support for oral care in the facility – whether there is an oral health practitioner on staff, whether a dentist visits residents in the home, or whether assistance is available to leave the facility to visit the family dentist or local dentist.

Accessing dental care

PRIVATE SERVICES

Private dentists can provide preventive care as well as treatment. Partial rebates on dental fees can be claimed as part of dental extras coverage for those with private health insurance.

PUBLIC SERVICES

Holders of Pensioner Concession or Commonwealth Seniors Health Cards may be eligible for public dental services free of charge (waiting lists can be long, however).

Questions to ask about oral health needs in residential aged care

1. How will I be supported to look after my mouth and teeth?
2. How will my oral health needs be assessed?
3. What food options are available?
4. Can I keep my usual dentist?
5. Is there an oral health outreach program in place?
6. How will I get to my offsite dentist appointment?
7. What fees will I have to pay for my daily oral health care?
8. What happens if my dentures get damaged or lost?
9. Have staff been trained in oral health?
10. What happens if I need emergency dental care?

For more information, download the dental and oral health brochure at www.10questions.org.au

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