Your Mouth is the Gateway to Your Body

Maintaining healthy teeth and gums is important because harmful bacteria in the mouth can not only ruin your teeth and gums, but may be associated with serious medical conditions. Research has shown that infections in the mouth may be tied to heart disease, stroke, diabetes, pneumonia and other health problems common in older adults. In addition, many of these conditions (and including anemia and nutrient deficiencies) can affect the health and appearance of your teeth, gums and tongue.

Taking care of your teeth
Prevent tooth damage and decay by eating fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean proteins like turkey, chicken and fish, and limiting processed foods and beverages that are high in sugar. In addition:

- Don’t chew ice or hard foods that might crack or chip your teeth.
- Limit acidic foods like citrus and sipping sodas and other drinks with sugar and citric acid for long periods of time. This can eat away at your teeth’s enamel.
- Avoid sugary foods like candy, and sticky foods like raisins that can promote bacterial growth and tooth decay.
- Drink water with fluoride or use fluoride toothpaste to help prevent tooth decay.
- Get enough calcium — 1200 mg per day, preferably from foods, including low-fat dairy like milk, cheese and yogurt since they contain other bone building nutrients along with calcium. Vegetables such as leafy greens, broccoli, spinach, kale, and Swiss chard, also provide some calcium.
- Limit smoking as it increases problems with gum disease, tooth decay and tooth loss. It also slows down healing after dental procedures and can decrease the success rate of dental implants.
- Many medications can affect the taste of foods, your food preferences, and your appetite, so be sure to report any changes in your eating habits to your physician, dentist and dental hygienist.
- If you’ve lost any teeth, replace them. A full set of teeth will help you chew. Ill-fitting dentures can lead to diets of soft food that are low in nutrients and don’t help your mouth stay clean.

Attention Senior Citizens:
Have a nutritional question or concern? If you are participating in services offered by Schenectady County’s Senior and Long Term Care services, you are eligible to have a free consultation with a Registered Dietitian. Call Cornell Cooperative Extension, Schenectady County at 372-1622, ext. 269. Leave a message, if necessary, for dietitian to call you back.

Consumer-centered access for long-term care information, referrals and assessments. For information, call 382-8481, #9, ext.304

Schenectady County Department of Senior and Long Term Care Services denies no person services or access to service based upon race, color, sex, religion, national origin, marital status and/or handicapping conditions. Schenectady County Department of Senior and Long Term Care Services is primarily funded with County tax dollars. Supplemental funding is through the New York State Office for the Aging under Title III-B/D, III-C-1, III-C-2, III-F of the Federal Older Americans Act, and New York State Expanded In-Home Services for the Elderly (EISEP), Community Services for the Elderly Act (CSE), Congregate Services Initiative (CSI), and the Wellness In Nutrition (WIN).
Cleaning your teeth and dentures

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste. Choose a toothbrush with soft bristles and a small head to get to those hard-to-reach areas. Replace your toothbrush when the bristles become frayed. If your movement is limited, try an electric toothbrush.
- Clean between teeth daily. Use dental floss or pre-threaded flossers, water flossers or wooden plaque removers.
- If you wear dentures, clean them daily with special cleaners. To keep the lining of your mouth healthy, take them out of your mouth for at least four hours every 24 hours and/or remove them at night.

Get a dental checkup at least once a year—not just when you have pain as you may not feel or know when something is wrong. The dentist will also look for signs of oral cancer (open sores, white or reddish patches, and changes in the lips, tongue and lining of the mouth) and gum disease which can destroy the gums, bone and ligaments supporting the teeth.

Dry Mouth is a common cause of cavities in older adults. It is not a normal part of aging. However, it is a side-effect in more than 500 medications, including those for allergies or asthma, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, pain, anxiety or depression, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases. Some common ways to treat dry mouth:

- Use over-the-counter oral moisturizers, such as a spray or mouthwash, and lip moisturizers.
- Ask your physician about changing medications or dosage.
- Drink more water and drink often.
- Use sugar-free gum or lozenges to stimulate saliva production.
- Get a humidifier to help keep moisture in the air.
- Avoid foods and beverages that irritate dry mouths, like coffee, alcohol, carbonated soft drinks, and acidic fruit juices and limit dry and salty foods.
- Rinse your mouth frequently with water.

When caring for a disabled or older person:

1. Help them keep their mouth clean with reminders to brush and floss daily.
2. Make sure they get to a dentist regularly.
3. For those who wear dentures, pay close attention to their eating habits. If they’re having difficulty eating or are not eating as much as usual, denture problems could be the cause.

Be aware that there are dentists who specialize in caring for the elderly and disabled.

Keep those smiles going!

Sources used for this handout:
http://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/adults-over-60/
http://www.aplaceformom.com/senior-care-resources/articles/senior-dental-problems

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