



**CIGNA**

# Guide to understanding Oral Health



## Defining Oral Health

We all know that keeping our mouth healthy means following a daily hygiene routine at home and making regular visits to a dentist. We need our teeth and gums in good health so that we can chew food, smile and speak clearly – without pain and without having to worry about bad breath.

The Department of Health summed up Oral Health as being:

“The standard of health of the oral and related tissues which enables an individual to eat, speak and socialise without active disease, discomfort or embarrassment and which contributes to general well-being”.<sup>1</sup>

## Defining Oral Diseases

A range of conditions can be classified as oral diseases. This leaflet will look at some of them but more information can be found on the internet (some useful links can be found on the back of this leaflet). This leaflet will also give you some prevention tips but you should talk over any concerns you have with your dentist.

### Quick Tip:

After snacks drink plenty of water to dilute the acid attacks.

## Tooth decay

### What causes it?

If plaque isn't cleaned off your teeth regularly the acid produced can cause cavities to form and affected teeth can become sensitive to anything hot, acidic or sugary. The risk of getting cavities is heavily influenced by lifestyle, what we eat, how well we take care of our teeth and the presence of fluoride in our water and toothpaste.

### How common is it?

Tooth decay is one of the most widespread health problems in the UK. More than half of adults (and between half and two thirds of children) in the UK have one or more cavities. It is the most prevalent disease in the western world.

### How serious is it?

Left untreated, a cavity can destroy a tooth and kill the delicate nerves at its center, which may result in an abscess - an area of infection at the root tip. Once an abscess forms it can only be treated with a root canal, surgery or by extracting the tooth.

### What can I do?

Only your dentist can tell for sure whether you have a cavity so regular checkups are important. Preventive care can help stop problems from occurring and keep minor problems from becoming major ones. See our section on brushing up for healthy teeth and gums.

## Floss every day to clean between teeth

While brushing removes plaque from tooth surfaces, flossing is also an essential step in maintaining your oral hygiene because it removes plaque from between teeth and below the gumline - where periodontal (gum) disease often begins. Whether you use floss or select another type of interdental cleaner, ask your dentist how to use it properly so you can avoid injuring your gums.

### How to Floss

1. Break off about 18" of floss and wind most of it around one of your middle fingers. Wind the remaining floss around the same finger of the opposite hand. This finger will take up the floss as it becomes dirty.
2. Hold the floss tightly between your thumbs and forefingers, leaving a 1"-2" length in-between. To floss your upper teeth, use your thumbs to guide the floss between the edges of your teeth. To floss your lower teeth, use your index fingers.
3. When the floss reaches the beginning of the gum line, curve it into a C shape against one tooth. Gently slide it into the space between the gum and the tooth.
4. Hold the floss firmly against the tooth. Gently rub the side of the tooth, moving the floss away from the gum with up and down motions.
5. Repeat this method on all of your teeth.



### Quick Tip:

**Use a fluoride mouthwash in conjunction with brushing and flossing to kill germs and fight bacteria.**

### Remember

- Don't avoid cleaning between your teeth - even when it's awkward or uncomfortable.
- Always use a gentle rubbing motion. Never "snap" the floss into the gums.

# Oral Cancer

## What causes it?

Most cases of mouth cancer are linked to tobacco and alcohol. Cigarette, cigar and pipe smoking are the main forms of tobacco use in the UK. Alcohol increases the risk of mouth cancer, and if tobacco and alcohol are consumed together the risk is even greater.

## How common is it?

According to the British Health Foundation<sup>2</sup>, the number of new cases of oral cancer is on the increase. The condition is more common in men than in women, and most cases develop in people who are 40 years of age, or over.

## How serious is it?

If not detected early, oral cancer can require surgery, radiation therapy and/or chemotherapy. Approximately 4,400 new cases of oral cancer are diagnosed every year in the UK resulting in nearly 1,700 deaths.

## What can I do?

It's best to avoid smoking cigarettes, cigars or pipes. Those who stop using tobacco, even after many years of use, greatly reduce their risk for oral cancer. Reducing alcohol consumption, including switching to an alcohol free mouthwash is also advisable.

Detecting oral cancer early is the key to successful treatment but it isn't always possible to spot the earliest warning signs. You should visit your dentist if you notice any of the following:

- 👉 loose teeth
- 👉 a sore on the lips, gums, or inside of your mouth that bleeds easily and doesn't heal
- 👉 a lump or thickening in the cheek that you can feel with your tongue
- 👉 loss of feeling or numbness in any part of your mouth
- 👉 white or red patches on the gums, tongue or inside of mouth
- 👉 difficulty chewing or swallowing food
- 👉 unexplained pain in your mouth or feeling that something is caught in your throat with no known cause.

## Healthy Mouth Healthy Body

Infections in the mouth can play havoc elsewhere in the body. Ongoing dental research is uncovering the full extent to which oral health is linked to general health. Some of these include:

## Heart Disease

One theory<sup>3</sup> on the link between periodontal disease and heart disease is that bacteria enters the bloodstream through the mouth, attaches to fatty plaques in the arteries and contributes to clot formation. Blood clots can obstruct normal blood flow, restricting the amount of nutrients and oxygen needed for the heart to function properly. This may lead to heart attacks and increase the risk of stroke.

## Gum Disease

### What causes it?

Although there is some evidence that gum disease runs in families, the main cause is a build up of plaque.

### How common is it?

Most people suffer from some form of gum disease, and it is the major cause of tooth loss in adults.



### How serious is it?

There are three stages of gum disease:

- 🔴 **Gingivitis:** This is the earliest stage of gum disease. Plaque build-up at the gum line causes this area to become red, swollen and shiny and the gums will bleed on brushing. At this early stage in gum disease, damage can be reversed, since the bone and connective tissue that hold the teeth in place are not yet affected.
- 🔴 **Periodontitis:** At this stage, the gums pull away from your teeth and may begin to form a pocket - trapping food and plaque that you can't reach with a toothbrush.
- 🔴 **Advanced Periodontitis:** In this final stage of gum disease, the fibers and bone supporting the teeth are destroyed, which can cause the teeth to shift or loosen. This can affect bite and, if aggressive treatment can't save them, teeth may need to be removed.

### What can I do?

Visit your dentist or hygienist if you have any of the symptoms of gum disease which can include:

- 🔴 red, swollen gums which bleed easily - especially when brushing
- 🔴 an unpleasant taste in your mouth
- 🔴 bad breath
- 🔴 loose teeth
- 🔴 regular mouth infections.

Gum disease is never cured but as long as you keep up the home care you have been taught you can slow down its progress. You must make sure you go for regular check ups with the dentist and hygienist, as often as they recommend.

## Brush up for healthy teeth & gums

Brushing your teeth freshens your breath, improves the appearance of your teeth, and removes bacteria-laden plaque and food particles from the exposed surfaces of your teeth.

1. Angle the bristles next to the outer surface of your teeth toward the gum line.
2. Gently move the brush in a circular motion, making sure to reach the back teeth.
3. Scrub the inside and chewing surfaces, especially the grooves that may collect food particles in your back teeth.
4. Use the tip of the toothbrush in a circular motion to clean the front teeth.
5. Finally, gently brush your tongue to make your entire mouth feel clean and to freshen your breath.

### Remember

- Be sure to brush your teeth at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Brush gently. The tips of the bristles do the cleaning, so don't squash them.
- Change the position of the brush frequently, moving slowly across all the surfaces of every tooth.
- Replace your toothbrush regularly (every 6 weeks is usually recommended)



### Finding the right toothbrush

- Make sure your toothbrush fits your hand comfortably and is shaped so that it reaches all parts of your mouth.
- A soft bristled brush is the most effective because the bristles get down into the grooves and spaces where plaque and food particles hide. Soft bristles are also less likely to harm teeth and gums.



## Diabetes

Periodontal disease is often associated with diabetes – probably because diabetics are more susceptible to contracting infections and have a tougher time healing. Severe chronic gum disease may impact a diabetic individual's ability to control blood glucose levels. Good dental health may be linked<sup>4</sup> to a reduced risk of diabetic complications.

## Preterm Birth

All infections are cause for concern among pregnant women because they pose a risk to the health of the baby. Evidence<sup>5</sup> is mounting that periodontal disease in pregnancy may contribute to babies being born too early and too small.

## Respiratory Diseases

Scientists have found<sup>6</sup> that bacteria in the mouth can be inhaled into the lungs to cause respiratory diseases such as pneumonia – especially in people with periodontal disease.

## Osteoporosis

Research<sup>7</sup> shows bone health may be connected to the health of your jawbone, teeth and even your gums. This means your dentist may be the first to suspect the presence of osteoporosis (based on your medical history, your risk factors and the results of clinical and x-ray examinations.)

More research is needed to fully understand the mouth body connection. The good news is, caught early, preventative measures and medications can slow the development of health complications.

### Quick Advice:

**Be sure to tell your dentist if you have diabetes or a heart condition and what, if any, medications you are taking for it.**



## Further help and advice

Log onto CIGNA's Health and Wellbeing site [www.cigna.co.uk/health/wellbeing](http://www.cigna.co.uk/health/wellbeing) for instructions on how to maintain good oral health. Our oral health assessments will help you to assess your risk of getting cavities and gum disease. You can take the results along to your check-up for further discussion with your dentist.

## Useful Links:

[www.dentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.dentalhealth.org.uk)

[www.bda.org.uk](http://www.bda.org.uk)

[www.bsperio.org.uk](http://www.bsperio.org.uk)

---

## References:

- <sup>1</sup> Department of Health. An Oral Health Strategy for England. London: Department of Health; 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> [www.dentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.dentalhealth.org.uk)
- <sup>3</sup> [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15699278](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15699278)
- <sup>4</sup> [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15857077](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15857077)
- <sup>5</sup> [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19375568](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19375568)
- <sup>6</sup> [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19419436](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19419436)
- <sup>7</sup> [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19142520](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19142520)

---

CIGNA HealthCare Benefits

1 Knowe Road, Greenock, Scotland PA15 4RJ

62 Threadneedle Street, London, EC2R 8HP

CIGNA HealthCare Benefits is a trading name. The following companies are part of that group: CIGNA Life Insurance Company of Europe S.A.-N.V., registered in Belgium with limited liability (Brussels trade register no. 4421 437 284), Avenue de Cortenbergh 52, 1000 Brussels, Belgium. Regulated by the Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission (Commission Bancaire, Financière et des Assurances - CBFA) of Belgium and subject to limited regulation by the Financial Services Authority. Details of the extent of our regulation by the Financial Services Authority are available from us on request. CIGNA European Services (UK) Limited, registered in England (UK Company no. 199739), 62 Threadneedle Street, London, EC2R 8HP. VAT Registration No. 740445451