

# A Healthy Mouth for a Healthy Caregiver

## **Why is your oral health important?**

Caregiving can be stressful at times. You suddenly have an irregular and demanding schedule. If you provide care to an older family member, you may experience additional emotional and financial problems. Any of these circumstances may result in your providing lax or irregular oral care for yourself.

Research shows that mouth health affects overall health. [Inflammation](#) and infections in the mouth are linked to increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and pancreatic cancer. Diabetics also have more trouble healing and controlling their sugar level. Tobacco use can increase the risk of gum disease and oral cancer.

## **What are the signs of oral health problems?**

There are many signs of oral health problems. Some of them are silent. Check yourself and your older adult for pain and/or swelling in and around the mouth, the inability to eat hot and cold foods/drinks and difficulty chewing. Do the gums bleed or have pus? Are the teeth covered with food, plaque-biofilm, tartar and/or stains? Do you smell bad breath? Bad breath can be a sign of problems in the mouth or other systemic problems. Are there any loose teeth? Do you or your senior have poor-fitting dentures? If you find any of these signs, schedule a dental visit.

## **I want to improve my own oral health. Where do I begin?**

Preventing oral health problems begins with your own careful oral care.

- Brush your teeth after meals and at least twice a day using a soft [toothbrush](#). Be sure to brush all of the teeth at the gum line and include all tooth surfaces, inside and outside. Also, gently, brush your tongue.
- Clean in-between the teeth (using [floss](#) or another interdental aid).
- Use an antibacterial mouth rinse that is alcohol free (alcohol may cause dry mouth), as recommended by your dental professional.
- Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet.
- Regularly visit your dentist and dental hygienist for check-ups and cleanings.

In addition to improving your own oral health, practicing regular oral self-care can be contagious. Be a good role model. Let your older adult observe you practicing good oral self-care and talk with them about the importance of it. Doing so will help reinforce the importance of good oral health for both of you. The goal is to keep our teeth for a lifetime and be free from disease. A healthy mouth is an important part of keeping you and your older adult in good overall health.