



Seniors *and* Oral Health



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Introduction

A lot of people think that losing their teeth is a natural part of aging. It isn't. Many older adults today are keeping most, if not all their natural teeth. This is a result of improved preventive care, dental insurance benefits or having spent considerable amounts of money restoring and maintaining their teeth. Having natural teeth has allowed older adults to enjoy a better quality of life as well as improved health. For seniors who are missing teeth, having dentures and maintaining them are just as important. Good oral health is important for overall health and well-being. A clean, healthy, pain free mouth contributes to better chewing of healthy food, speaking clearly, sleeping well and feeling good about yourself. It is just as important to look after your mouth as it is to keep the rest of your body in good shape.

Dental Care for low income seniors

The new Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program was announced in the 2019 Ontario budget. The government has committed to fund a dental program for low-income seniors 65 and older. Currently, 1 in 5 people in Ontario do not access a dentist because they cannot afford the cost. This includes many seniors who lose their dental benefits upon retirement and those that are in long-term care homes unable to access a dentist. This new program removes the barrier of access and will improve the lives of low income seniors.



Cavities

Cavities are caused by a special type of bacteria. This bacteria feeds on the sugar in foods and drinks and forms into plaque. The acids in plaque over time can cause cavities and bad breath.

Cavities are common in older adults on the root surfaces of teeth and at the edges of fillings. Brushing too hard and the effects of gum disease can cause gums to recede, exposing the roots of teeth. This area is more susceptible to decay because it is not protected by enamel. Cavities can be painless at first. As they get larger, the tooth may become painful and/or break. If left untreated, pain and infection can occur and an abscess could develop.

Gum disease (gingivitis and periodontal disease)

Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria that constantly forms on your teeth. Plaque doesn't just cause cavities. If it is not removed daily by brushing and flossing, it hardens into dental calculus or tartar. Tartar is a solid yellow deposit that can be seen on teeth, but also forms below the gums and on dentures. A combination of plaque, tartar and poor oral hygiene will give a person bad breath, tooth decay and periodontal disease (gum disease).

Periodontal disease is the most common cause of tooth loss in adults. Most older adults have gum disease. The first stage of gum disease is gingivitis, which is inflammation of the gums around the edge of the teeth. Periodontitis is a more severe form of gum disease that may develop when gingivitis goes untreated. It affects the gum tissue and the bone that holds the tooth in place. If left untreated it will eventually lead to tooth loss.

Signs of gum disease:

- Swollen or red puffy gums.
- Bleeding gums, particularly when you brush.
- Bad breath that doesn't go away.
- Sore, painful or loose teeth.
- Teeth that have moved.
- Receding gums.
- Difficulty eating and increased sensitivity to hot and cold foods.

There are several factors that may increase your risk of developing gum disease, these include:

- Chronic illness (e.g. diabetes).
- Tobacco and alcohol use.
- Poor nutrition.
- Not brushing and flossing your teeth.
- Hormonal changes in women.
- Medications.
- Age.





**Brush and
floss your
teeth every
day**

Care of natural teeth

2 FOR 2 IS WHAT YOU DO . . .

- Brush your teeth for two minutes twice a day (morning and bedtime) to remove plaque.
- Bedtime is the most important time to brush to help prevent cavities.
- Use a manual or power toothbrush with soft bristles.
- Use toothpaste that contains fluoride and is recommended by the Canadian Dental Association.
- Move the toothbrush in a small circular motion over the teeth and gums.
- Brush the outside, inside and chewing surfaces of the teeth.
- Gently brush the tongue to remove any germs and freshen your breath.
- Sometimes a lack of strength due to stroke, arthritis or Parkinson's disease makes it harder to grip a standard toothbrush.
- Floss at least once a day to clean between the teeth and under the gums.
- If flossing is difficult, flossing aids are available which may help.

Here are some suggestions to adapt a toothbrush and floss:

- Try an electric or battery-operated toothbrush.
- Use a Velcro strap or wide elastic band to hold the toothbrush secure (taking care that the band is not too tight).
- Extend the length of the toothbrush handle by attaching a tongue depressor, a ruler or a paint stir stick.
- Enlarge the toothbrush handle by inserting into a rubber ball, a styrofoam ball, a bicycle handle or foam tubing.
- Use floss picks or floss handles.



Dentures

Teeth can be lost due to tooth decay, gum disease or injury. Dentures are one option used to replace missing teeth. Dentures are made in a dental laboratory from moulds made of your mouth. They are usually made from acrylic (plastic) and may have metal clasps to keep them in place. Complete dentures are required when all your teeth are missing. It is removable; rests on your gums and stays in with suction. Partial dentures are used to replace a few missing teeth. It rests on your gums and is supported by the healthy teeth you have left.

Your mouth changes constantly, so your dentures may need adjusting to maintain a good, comfortable fit. Your dentures and your mouth should be checked by a dental professional yearly. Your dental professional can clean your

Wearing dentures does not mean you don't need dental check-ups.

dentures, examine your mouth, check for oral cancer and review your home-care routine. If you experience sore gums, pain, difficulty chewing, bad breath, or if your dentures are broken or loose, see your dental professional.

Just rinsing them is not enough

Even if you have complete dentures you still need to care for your gums. Cleaning your gums stimulates them and helps keep them firm and less likely to become infected. When you remove your dentures give your mouth a good rinse, massage your gums with a clean wash cloth and brush your tongue and cheeks with a soft bristled toothbrush. If wearing a partial denture, remember to brush your natural teeth twice a day and floss daily. These steps will help freshen your breath and keep your teeth and gums healthy. Healthy gums will keep your dentures fitting well, longer.



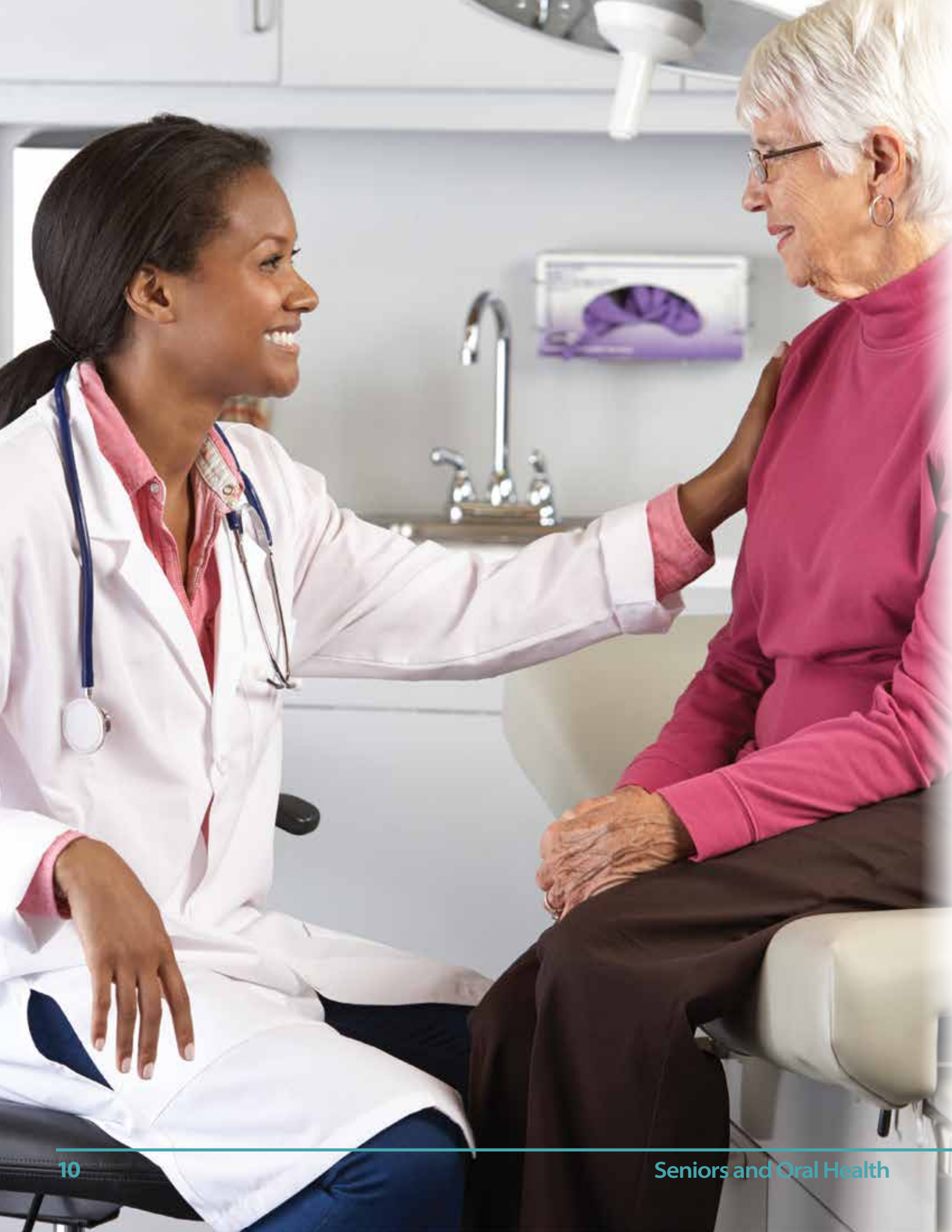
Dental implants and crowns

Dental implants are a popular and successful alternative for replacing missing teeth. They are titanium posts that fuse directly to the bone and do not damage surrounding teeth. An implant is treated like a natural tooth. Crowns are cemented onto a natural tooth that has been weakened by a large filling, a fracture, crack or root canal. They can be made from

metal, gold or tooth coloured material.

Clean an implant or crown like your natural teeth, with a soft toothbrush and floss daily. Ensure that the gum line is always brushed around a fixed prosthesis.





Medical history and dental appointments

It's important to tell your dental care provider about your health history and any medical conditions you have. This would include a recent illness or hospitalization. They will ask you what medications (both prescribed by your doctor and over the counter) you are taking and the name of your doctor. This helps your dental care provider treat you safely and effectively.

Tell your oral health care provider if you:

- Smoke.
- Have any health problems or medical conditions you are being treated for.
- Have any changes in your general health.
- Have any allergies.
- Are taking any medications or changed them since your last visit.
- Have any dental or mouth problems or fears about going to the dentist.

At your first appointment you will have a dental exam. This usually includes:

- Reviewing your Health History.
- Examination of the inside and outside of your mouth.
- Assessing the health of your gum tissue.
- Taking x-rays of your teeth and surrounding bone.
- Discussing your treatment needs.
- Giving you advice about looking after your mouth.
- Depending on whether you have teeth you may have them cleaned at your first appointment.
- Unless you have a tooth ache or some other emergency you usually will need to come back for further treatment.

Oral cancer

Many people do not realize that you can get cancers in the mouth, on the skin of the lips, under the tongue and in the back of the throat. Changes in and around your mouth could be a sign of oral cancer or other serious diseases. Mouth cancer is not often identified until it is advanced. Treatment is most effective if the cancer is caught early. Therefore, it is important to know the risks, symptoms and ways to prevent mouth cancer. If something in your mouth doesn't feel right, see your dentist.

Risk factors

- **Tobacco products:** Smoking or using tobacco products increases the risk, especially if combined with high alcohol consumption. This includes smokeless tobacco, cigarettes, snuff, chewing tobacco, betel quid, paan and areca nut.
- **Alcohol:** Drinking alcohol, especially in excess and combined with smoking, increases the risk of developing oral cancer.
- **Human Papillomavirus (HPV):** There is increasing evidence that certain strains of HPV infection, especially HPV-16, cause oral cancers.
- **Age:** People over the age of 40 have a higher risk.
- **Gender:** Men are more susceptible than women are.
- **Sun exposure:** Increases risk of developing lip cancer.



Signs and symptoms

- White or red patches in your mouth, on your lips or tongue.
- Lumps, swelling in your mouth, neck of face.
- Bleeding or open sores that do not heal within two weeks.
- Pain or difficulty swallowing.
- Feeling that something is caught in your throat.
- Hoarseness (changes in the sound of your voice).

Dental professionals perform regular screening for oral cancer. It is important that you learn what is normal in your mouth.

Between visits, you should check your lips, all areas of the tongue, gums, roof of the mouth, floor of the mouth and inside the cheeks. Report any changes to your dental professional.

Medical marijuana/cannabis

Many seniors use cannabis for medicinal reasons, including pain and insomnia. There needs to be more research on its effects with the elderly. Cannabis can cause side effects when mixed with other medications, such as increasing the risk of bleeding, lowering blood pressure, and affecting blood sugar levels. Not enough is known about the potential side effects, including confusion and an increased risk of seniors falling. The use of cannabis, particularly marijuana smoking, has been associated with poor oral health, poor oral hygiene practices and less visits to the dentist. It also leads to xerostomia (dry mouth), which can contribute to several oral health conditions. The THC in marijuana is an appetite stimulant (you get the munchies), leading people to consume snack foods, which can cause cavities. Regular cannabis users are known to have more cavities especially on normally easy-to-reach smooth surfaces of the teeth.



Nutrition

A well-balanced, nutritious diet is important at any age for good oral health and general health. Choose a variety of different foods from Canada's Food Guide. Eating a nutritious breakfast is a great start to your day. Try cereals that are low in sugar, whole grain breads, fresh fruit, yogurt, milk, cheese or eggs. Choosing snacks that are nutritious, sugar-free, and do not stick to your teeth are the best dental snacks. Sugar is one of the main causes of dental problems.

Cut down your sugar intake by:

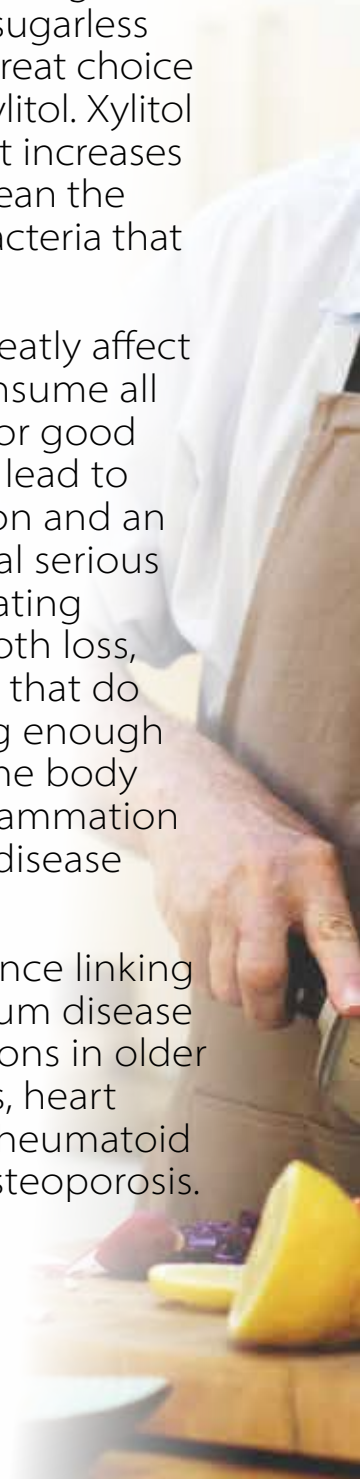
- Drinking plenty of water, its sugar free and a great way to quench your thirst.
- Choosing drinks with the least amount of sugar.
- Avoiding pop and energy drinks.
- Adding less sugar to coffee or tea.
- Limiting juice, they have as much sugar as pop.
- Shopping, read the ingredients list, honey, molasses, liquid invert sugar, glucose, and fructose are all types of sugar.
- Avoiding sticky sweets and snacks. They can stick to teeth and are harder to brush away.
- Eating sweets with a meal, not

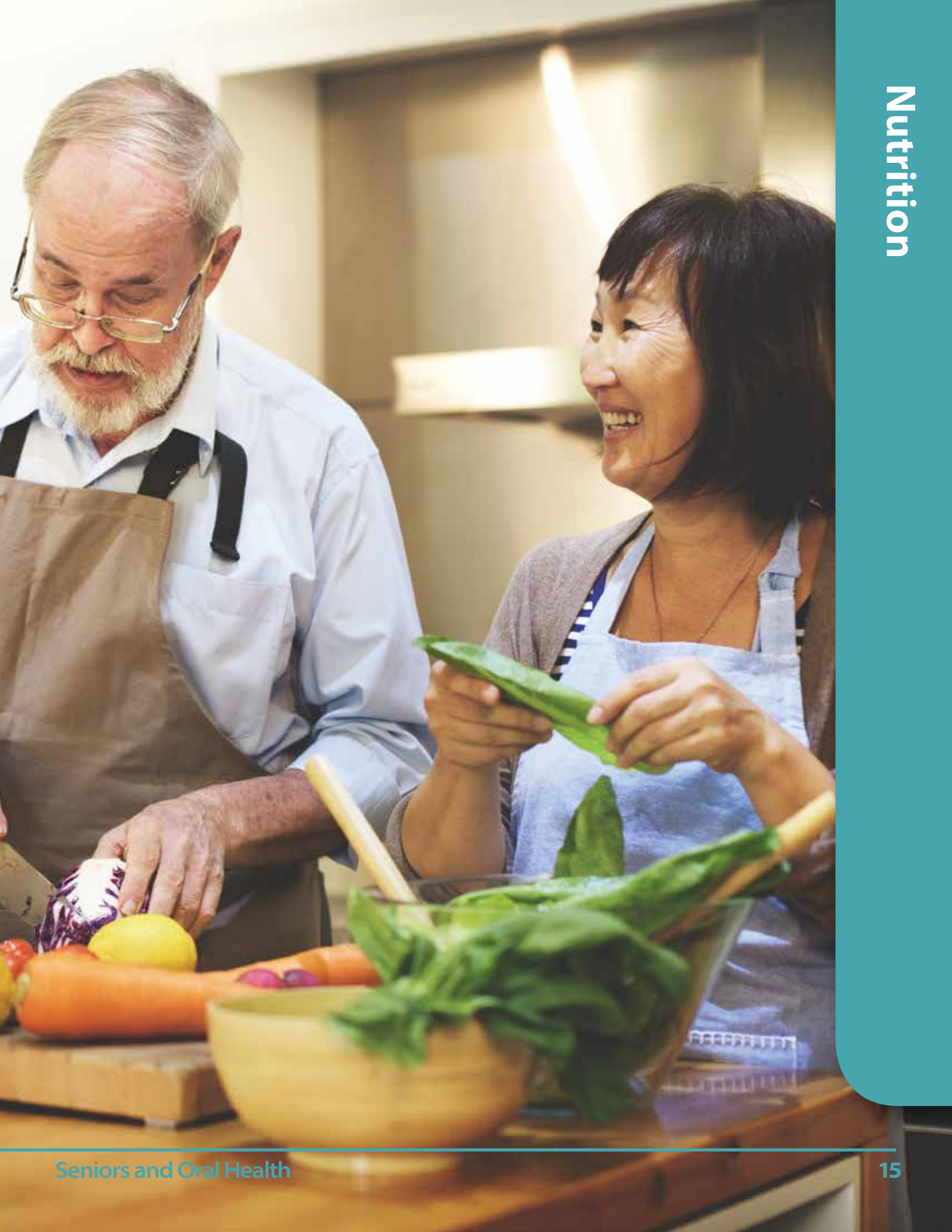
as a snack. The increased flow of saliva during a meal helps to wash away and dilute sugar.

- Chewing a piece of sugarless gum after meals. A great choice is gum containing xylitol. Xylitol is a natural sugar that increases saliva flow to help clean the teeth and kills the bacteria that cause cavities.

Poor oral health can greatly affect a person's ability to consume all the nutrients needed for good overall health. This can lead to weight loss, malnutrition and an increased risk for several serious conditions. Difficulty eating could be caused by tooth loss, dry mouth or dentures that do not fit properly. Getting enough nutritious food helps the body resist infection and inflammation including periodontal disease (gum disease).

There is growing evidence linking poor oral health and gum disease to other health conditions in older adults such as diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, rheumatoid arthritis, obesity and osteoporosis.





Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease in which a person has high blood sugar and that affects your immune system, leaving you more susceptible to infection. Research has shown the link that gum disease can worsen if your blood sugar is not under control and your blood sugars could be off if you have gum disease.

Some common side effects of diabetes and the mouth are:

- yeast infections called oral thrush (candidiasis) and it looks like a white coating on the tongue and inside of the cheeks. Thrush is more common in people who wear dentures and can often leave a bad taste in your mouth.
- dry mouth.
- cuts and sore that don't heal quickly or properly.
- changes in taste.

Heart disease

Oral health and heart disease are connected by chronic inflammation caused by oral diseases and the spread of bacteria from your mouth to other parts of the body through the blood stream. The plaque found in the mouth can enter the blood stream and attach to the blood vessels and increase your risk to cardiovascular disease.



Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a disease that affects bones making them weaker. Women are much more likely to be diagnosed with osteoporosis (80% vs. 20%) than men. After menopause, a women's risk for osteoporosis increases. Osteoporosis can cause bone loss in the jaws as well as the body. Existing gum disease may become worse, teeth may become loose and dentures may not fit well. Some people are prescribed medication (bisphosphonates) for the treatment of osteoporosis. It is important to discuss the use of these medications with your dentist, especially before any dental surgery.

Menopause

Menopause means the end of female menstrual periods due to less hormone production. Along with hormone changes and hot flashes, some women experience problems with their mouths including pain, a dry mouth, burning mouth or changes in taste. Gums may become dry, shiny, bleed easily and range in colour from very pale to very red. Existing gum disease may get worse.



Osteoporosis • Menopause

Dry mouth

Xerostomia or dry mouth occurs when there is a decrease in saliva flow. Saliva helps flush food particles and bacteria from the mouth. Lack of saliva causes bacteria to accumulate, increasing the risk of developing cavities and gum disease. Dry mouth can be extremely uncomfortable and may lead to difficulty speaking, chewing, swallowing, bad breath and bleeding gums.

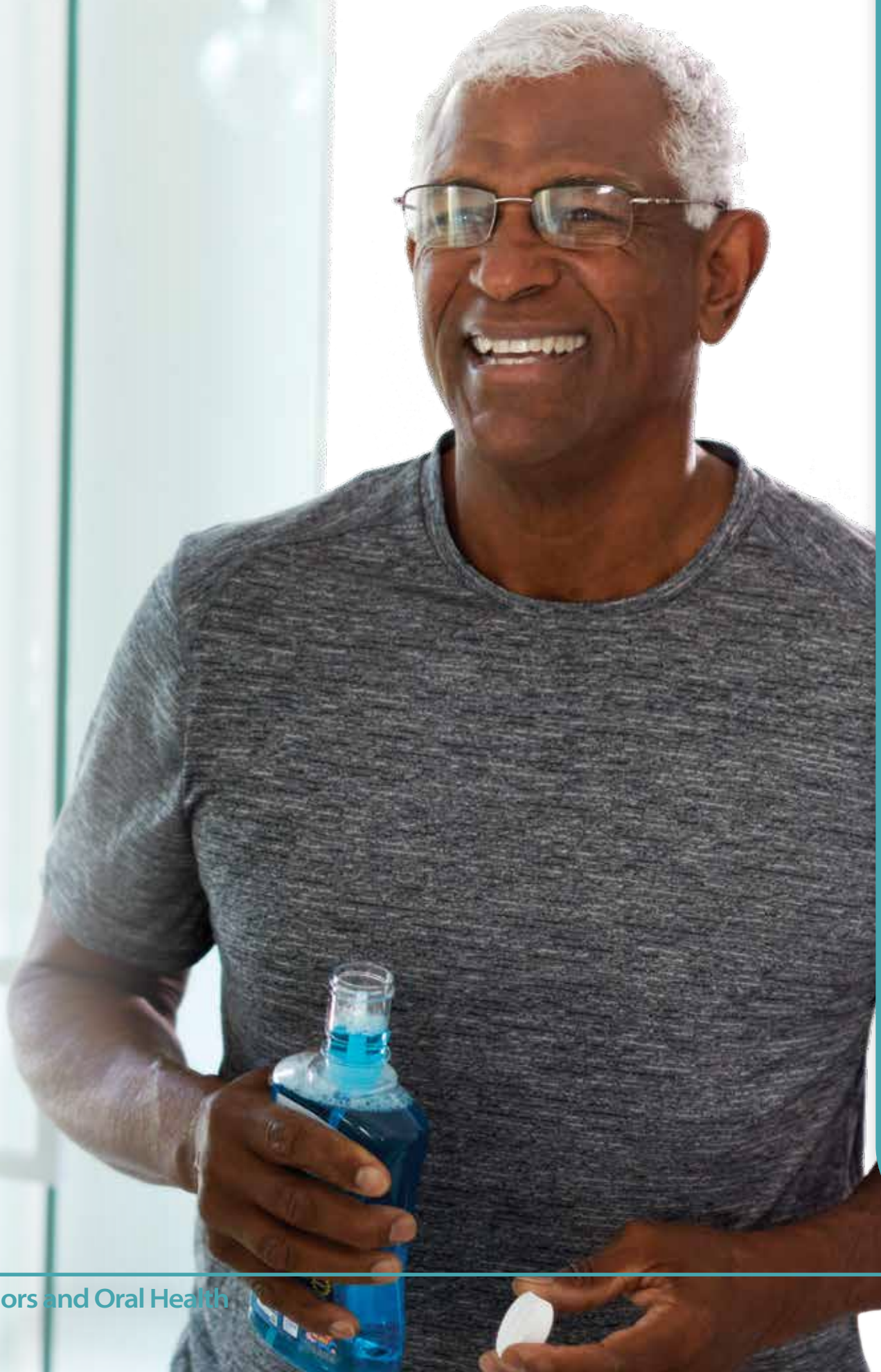
Dry mouth is one of the most common oral conditions. Many medications used to treat common medical conditions including; high blood pressure, heart problems and depression; radiation therapy to the neck and head; Sjogren's syndrome; diabetes and dehydration cause dry mouth. Smoking and drinking alcohol can make this condition worse.

Symptoms may include:

- Thirst (cravings for sugary carbonated drinks)
- Broken teeth or cavities at the gum line
- Sores or split skin at corners of mouth, cracked lips
- Dry, red, raw tongue
- Dry throat
- Bad breath
- Overall soreness or burning in the mouth
- Denture wearers may find that their dentures don't stay in place as well

Treatments and care:

- Brush your teeth two times a day (morning and night) with a fluoride toothpaste
- Floss once a day
- Visit your dentist regularly
- Maintain a healthy diet
- Sip water throughout the day, clear green tea is also known to help dry mouth
- Chew sugar-free gum (with Xylitol)
- Suck on sugar-free candies or mints
- Use over the counter saliva substitutes (e.g. Biotene)
- Use alcohol free mouthwash only
- Limit sugary drinks and foods that can cause cavities (e.g. pop, juice and candies)
- When possible, avoid the use of allergy medications



Oral health emergencies

Often injuries to the face and mouth look worse than they are. The tissue in the mouth bleeds readily and as it mixes with saliva it appears there is more blood. In the case of a dental emergency, stay calm. Knowing what to do in an emergency can make all the difference between saving and losing a tooth.

The Oral Health Division advises you to seek the care of a dentist with any problem you may have regarding your teeth, mouth and gums.

If you qualify, the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program (OSDCP) may help with the cost of dental care.

Toothache or abscess

- If swelling occurs this could be from an abscess (a tooth infection that can be serious if left untreated).
- Place a cold compress on the face next to the sore tooth.
- **DO NOT** use heat as this can increase swelling and pain.
- **DO NOT** place aspirin, other pain relievers or numbing gels on gum tissue around the sore tooth.
- See a dentist immediately.

Knocked-out tooth

- CHECK to see if you have any serious injuries such as a cut lip, cheek or tongue.
- If a tooth is knocked out, find it, it may be saved (especially if it is put back in place with an hour or two).
- If the tooth is dirty, rinse with water, but do not scrub or remove any attached tissue.
- If possible, carefully re-insert the tooth back into its socket and hold it there with clean gauze or a wash cloth.
- If you cannot replace the tooth in the socket, put the tooth in a container with milk immediately.
- See a dentist immediately.

Broken, chipped or bumped tooth

- Apply pressure to the injured site to control any bleeding.
- Gently clean any dirt from the injured area, using warm water.
- Place a cold compress on the face, in the area of the injured tooth, to minimize any swelling.
- If a tooth is pushed into the gum tissue, do not attempt to put it back into position.
- See a dentist as soon as possible.
- Bitten tongue or lip.
- The face and mouth can bleed a lot. Do not be alarmed.
- Apply direct pressure to the area with a clean cloth.
- If swelling is present, apply a cold compress to the affected area.
- If bleeding persists or the bite is severe, seek medical attention.
- Possible fractured jaw.
- Seek medical attention immediately.
- Lost filling.
- Keep the area clean.
- See a dentist as soon as possible.



A Healthy Mouth means a Healthy You

In 2000, the Surgeon General in the United States wrote the first ever report on Oral Health in America. He said:

“Oral health is integral to general health. You cannot be healthy without oral health. Oral health and general health should not be interpreted as separate entities.”

Oral diseases are progressive and cumulative and become more complex over time. They can affect our ability to eat, the foods we choose, how we look and the way we communicate. These diseases can affect economic productivity and compromise our ability to work at home, at school or on the job.”

For information about the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program contact Durham Region Oral Health Division.

Healthy **Mouth**
Healthy **YOU**



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Durham Health Connection Line
905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729
durham.ca/oralhealth



If you require this information in an accessible format,
contact 1-800-841-2729.

