**ORAL HEALTH FOR OLDER ADULTS**

**Q:** Are dental check-ups really that necessary for older adults?

**A:** Very much. Oral health is an important part of older persons' general health well-being.

### Actions for Your Good Oral Health

- Brush teeth with fluoride toothpaste for two minutes at least twice per day. At least once per day, use floss or interdental/proxy brushes.

- Take care of dentures, night guards or other appliances with daily brushing, use of denture cleaners; clean gums.

- Maintain a well-balanced diet; avoid sugary foods and drinks.

- Schedule regular dental hygiene appointments — at least every six months. Your dental hygienist can often detect problems, in addition to reviewing effective oral hygiene procedures.

- Alert your dental office if you have tooth sensitivity; bleeding and sore gums; patches on sores in mouth; gaps between teeth; other problems with gums or teeth; or if your dentures or other appliances become ill-fitting.

- At each dental visit, tell dental professionals about any change in health conditions you have and any medications you’re taking.
Oral Health for Older Persons: More Than a Matter of a Smile

Since retirement, Franklin had a lot of aches and pains, heart problems, and enough pills for one of those pill boxes with compartments for each day of the week. But he'd always had teeth as strong as an ox. He hadn't been to a dental office for awhile. He thought his teeth were the least of his problems. He thought wrong.

Issues for Older Adults

U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that almost 1 in 3 Americans age 65 or older have untreated tooth decay (caries). They've lost an average 13 teeth; one in three has no natural teeth; and more than two in five have periodontal disease. With preventive care, it doesn't have to happen as you get older. In fact, tooth retention and gum health is improving among adults.

Periodontitis: Inflammation of gum tissues (gingivitis), if untreated, can lead to decay, bone loss and even tooth loss—part of periodontal disease.

Plaque or biofilm from microorganisms, when not removed from your teeth, can result in tooth decay and periodontal diseases. Once plaque hardens, the removal of this tartar can't be done by brushing but requires dental hygiene cleaning.

Without good oral health care, fillings and crowns can break down, providing more space for food to settle and plaque to build up if not removed.

Something to chew on: Pain and missing teeth create difficulties in speaking, chewing and swallowing—causing social and nutritional problems.

So What Else Ails You?

Oral-systemic health link: Research indicates connections between oral health and systemic disease, such as heart conditions and diabetes.

Smoking and chewing tobacco are detrimental to healthy teeth and gums.

Oral cancer: Diagnosis of oral cancer of the mouth, tongue, lips or throat occurs seven times as often in persons 65 or older - some 28,000 Americans each year, according to the CDC. Dental check-ups can detect signs of oral cancer at an early stage, when there is seldom pain to signal a problem.

Short on saliva: Conditions like dry mouth (xerostomia), which may result from other health problems or from diuretics, antihistamines or other medicines, also can affect oral health. Lack of saliva, which acts as a cleansing agent in breaking down food particles and helps protect your teeth, gums and tissue from the acids in plaque, can increase opportunity for decay and disease.

Beyond physical limitations: Holding a brush and flossing can be difficult for some older adults with arthritic or other physical limitations. A power brush may be easier to handle.

Your dental hygienist can show you how to make the most of your brushing, flossing and use of proxy or interdental brushes to help you get between teeth and other hard-to-access areas.