

# AGING TODAY

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## UNDERSTANDING ORAL CONDITIONS

The most common oral conditions include the following:

**Tooth Decay.** Nearly one in five elders has untreated tooth decay (cavities), according to the *U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey* (1999–2002). Although dental-disease prevention programs have focused on children, as adults increasingly keep their teeth into old age and develop new decay at a higher rate than children, programs are concentrating more attention on elders. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is trying to inform older adults about the benefits of fluoride, which reduces and prevents decay in people of all ages. About 100 million Americans are not served by public water systems providing fluoridated water.

**Periodontal (Gum) Diseases.** Gingivitis, the mildest periodontal disease, is an inflammation of the gum tissue. The result of bacterial plaque, the sticky film that forms on teeth constantly, gingivitis is best held in check with daily oral hygiene. Also, plaque left on the teeth too long forms hard deposits or tartar, which can only be removed in a dental office. Left untreated, gingivitis can lead to severe periodontal disease. About one-fourth of older adults have advanced periodontal disease that can lead to tooth loss, according to *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General* (2000).

**Toothless (Edentate) Adults.** According to 1999–2002 data from the *U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey*, about one-fourth of older adults have lost all their natural teeth. Low-income elders are twice as likely as those with higher incomes to have lost all teeth, according to these data.

**Dry Mouth (Xerostomia).** Dry mouth—also known as xerostomia—is a sticky, dry feeling in the mouth, throat or lips. A lack of saliva can increase the risk of tooth decay and mouth infections, causing problems with tasting, chewing, swallowing and talking. More than 400 commonly used medications—most notably antihistamines, diuretics and antidepressants—can cause dry mouth. In addition, many medical treatments, such as head and neck radiation or chemotherapy, can cause inflammation of oral mucous tissues and reduce the flow of saliva. Dry mouth also can be a sign of diabetes, Parkinson's disease or other conditions. To relieve the symptoms of dry mouth and prevent oral problems, dentists and other health professionals recommend drinking extra water and reducing intake of sugar, caffeine, alcohol and tobacco. They may also suggest purchasing artificial saliva, available at most drug stores, or sugar-free hard candy. Also, some medications can help the salivary glands work better.

**Mouth and Throat Cancer.** Oral and pharyngeal cancers, which are diagnosed in about 28,000 Americans each year, result in about 7,200 deaths annually, CDC reports. Most people diagnosed with oral cancer are 60 or older, and up to 90% of these cancers are due to tobacco use and heavy alcohol consumption. Prognosis is generally poor, partly because these cancers are most often diagnosed at late stages. Early signs of oral cancer often are painless and difficult to identify. ❖

—Nancy Aldrich