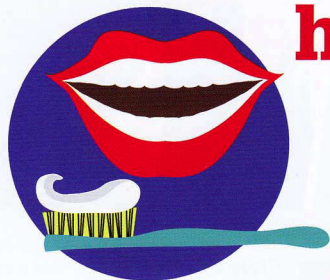





Maturing with

healthy smiles




While it is never too late to preserve and protect the health of one's teeth, it is important to note that by not making the effort to maintain the health of your teeth and gums in your prime just means that you may require extensive restorative, or reconstructive dentistry later in life advises **DR CHENG ENG WAH**

As our body matures, a vast number of changes occur in our metabolism, hormones and nutrition that can have an effect on our teeth, which tend to weaken, decay and break more often. Thanks to scientific developments and the preventive emphasis in dentistry, older adults are keeping their natural teeth longer. So it is useful to know what some of the general age-related dental issues are in order to be better prepared to handle them.

 **TOOTH DECAY** – Corrosive acids that cause decay are produced when the bacteria in our mouth feed on carbohydrates (sugars) in our diet. Over time, a minor decay can cause pain, infection and tooth loss if left untreated. While tooth decay takes place regardless of age, it can worsen as we grow older. Even after a long period of being able to successfully prevent or have very few teeth decay, adults can suddenly find themselves entering a phase where cavities become a significant problem.


One of the main reasons for this is the reduced production of saliva as we mature. Saliva, a key factor in the fight against tooth decay, contains shielding agents that can neutralise the acids that cause tooth demineralisation. It also carries minerals and antibacterial agents that slow down the growth of oral bacteria. To help circumvent this it is important to regularly drink sugarless fluids to keep our mouths moist and encourage the flow of saliva.

The build-up of plaque around older fillings is also quite common, as are other problems such as root caries (decaying of the tooth root) that happens when the gums recede to expose the softer root surface, which decays more easily than tooth enamel. Regular brushing and flossing with fluoride toothpaste is therefore very important to fight plaque build-up.


 **SENSITIVITY** – A number of factors can cause tooth sensitivity such as cavities, tartar build-up and overconsumption of acidic food and beverage. With the

natural recession of gums over time, there is an increased chance of hypersensitivity especially in areas of the teeth that are not well protected by enamel. As we age, areas that would usually be well concealed by gums become exposed and more vulnerable to pain or discomfort, which is usually aggravated when eating or drinking anything that is hot, cold, sweet, sour or spicy.


Maintaining good oral hygiene, using low-abrasive toothpaste and avoiding highly acidic foods and drinks to prevent erosion can prevent tooth sensitivity. Simple procedures such as laser desensitising or bonding to cover the exposed surface can also be done to help avoid further discomfort.

 **GUM DISEASE** – Evidence of periodontal disease is when the gums get red and swollen; bleed with the slightest irritation, and when pockets are developed between teeth and gums that trap food debris. This disease, also known as gingivitis, is generally found in varying degrees in older adults and if not treated can become increasingly destructive. Studies have also shown that with periodontal disease, heart attacks are 2.7 times more likely to occur and the risk of cardiovascular diseases is 1.5 times to twice higher.


It is especially important to practise a meticulous oral care routine even if you have managed to avoid periodontal disease until now. Healthy gums are typically a light or coral shade of pink and usually fit into a nice sharp point where it comes in contact with the teeth.


 **BRITTLINESS OF TEETH** – As we mature, pulps in our teeth become smaller due to fewer blood vessels and a reduction in nerve tissues. With less fluid content, our teeth become more brittle, which with the gnashing action of chewing can further wear down the enamel of the teeth making them more vulnerable to breakage and chips.


Another cause of tooth breakage or extensive wear and tear is the grinding of teeth, also known as bruxism, which usually occurs during sleep and has been categorised as a common sleep disorder. The most evident consequence of bruxing in addition to sore jaw muscles is the trauma and extensive wear down of teeth, which coupled with natural deterioration in tooth structure, can cause significant damage. Solutions in addressing this include nightguards, which can be worn to help protect your teeth as you sleep, and stress reduction, as stress tends to be one of the common reasons why we grind our teeth.

 **DARKENED TEETH** – As we grow older, the appearance of our teeth changes and there are a number of causes for this. Poor dental hygiene practices, a lifetime of consuming stain causing food and beverages, smoking and also the changes in dentin – the bonelike tissue that underlies the tooth enamel – can cause tooth discolouration. The outer layer of the enamel on our teeth gets worn away, revealing the natural yellow colour of dentin as we age.

While people with genetically thicker enamel may find minimal change to the colour of their teeth, others may want to look into preventive measures such as avoiding food and beverage that cause stains and restorative treatments that can improve this condition.

 **DRY MOUTH** – This tends to increase as we get older, and is also heightened by the use of medications and certain medical disorders. As saliva has an important function to play when it comes to chewing, these symptoms can be treated, where your dentist can recommend ways to restore moisture to your mouth and also address some of the oral health problems that may have caused it.

 **MISSING TEETH** – This condition poses more than just an aesthetic issue. While the reasons behind missing teeth may vary, the fact remains that if left untreated it can cause serious complications. A number of things may happen – food may get trapped in these gaps giving rise to bacterial growth, the remaining teeth may shift in an attempt to fill the gap left by the missing tooth that may even affect the ability to chew and speak, and the overall support structure of the mouth may weaken. As each tooth is supported by those around it, gaps left unfilled may cause additional tooth loss or injury that could worsen with time. Dentures, dental bridges or implants are choices you can choose from to replace missing teeth.

 **DEALING WITH DENTURES** – When it comes to wearing dentures, whether complete, partial or removable dentures; comfort is key, and is largely dependent on whether the remaining ridges in your mouth can provide the necessary support. With the removal of teeth, the remaining bone (ridge) continuously shrinks to a smaller size. As a result, the gum tissue that covers the ridge often becomes thinner and is more susceptible to irritation; these changes can also affect the comfort of dentures over time, causing pain and discomfort when it comes to chewing.

It is never too late to preserve and protect the health of one's teeth. It is important to note that by not making the effort to maintain the health of your teeth and gums in your prime just means that you may require extensive restorative, or reconstructive dentistry later in life.

It is also crucial to note that existing health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease or cancer can impact a person's oral health, and this too needs to be highlighted to your dentist, as with any other general health issues.

While simple oral hygiene practices such as brushing and flossing are essential, many oral health problems associated with aging require professional dental attention, so do not forget to factor in regular checkups into your overall health and wellness routine. *☞*

