



ORAL HEALTH AND SOUTH ASIANS

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Oral health refers to the optimal functioning (free of disease) of the mouth and its components including: teeth, gums, bones around the teeth, tongue, hard and soft palate, salivary glands, and lips.
- Oral diseases affecting the mouth can influence proper functioning of the mouth and its components; these oral diseases can also affect the health of the entire body.
- Diabetes, heart disease, and stroke can be associated with certain oral diseases and South Asians are at higher risk for these diseases.¹
- Oral diseases can be prevented by basic home care (brushing twice a day & flossing daily) and making routine visits every six months to a dental professional.

➤ CONDITIONS THAT CAN AFFECT THE MOUTH²

- *Dental caries, or cavities*, is an infection that affects the teeth. Specific bacteria form a layer on the outer surface of teeth. If this layer is not disrupted by proper brushing and flossing, the bacteria multiply and can eventually eat their way to the center of the tooth. Once this happens, the resulting painful infection will require a root canal or extraction.
 - *Symptoms include:* sensitivity to hot or cold foods, and recurrent oral pain.
- *Gingivitis* is an inflammation of gum tissue due to bacteria being present below the gum line. It is a precursor to the more serious disease of periodontitis. Gingivitis is reversible and preventing gingivitis is an important reason for brushing teeth and gums properly.

- *Symptoms include:* red, swollen, and bleeding gums.
- *Periodontitis* is a severe form of gum disease that results from untreated gingivitis progressing to irritate bone and the supporting structures around the teeth. Periodontitis cannot be cured, but can be stabilized by a dental professional. Periodontitis is connected with other conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.
 - *Symptoms include:* bleeding, swollen gums, bad breath and loose or mobile teeth.
- *Oral cancer* is the result of an abnormal tissue growth in the oral cavity. This condition can progress to destroy tissues in the oral cavity and can spread to other parts of the body as well.
 - High rates of oral cancer are reported in persons from South Asia, including India and Sri Lanka,³ and have been associated with excessive use of betel nut, tobacco, supari, and paan.
 - *Symptoms include:* a non-healing sore/ulcer in the mouth; white or red patch on gums, tongue, or mouth lining; difficulty chewing/swallowing; numbness of tongue or mouth.



➤ FOR BABIES AND CHILDREN

- Sharing of utensils between adults and young children should not be done. Cavity-causing bacteria can be transferred from adults to children's mouths by sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses.
- Babies should have their first dental exam within six months of the first tooth appearing in their mouth.
- Baby teeth should be cleaned with a soft toothbrush or wet gauze. Toothpaste should only be used once the child is able to spit.
- Babies should not sleep with a bottle and sugary foods should be limited.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Brush your teeth no less than two minutes twice a day with a soft toothbrush and fluoridated toothpaste. You should also brush your gums and tongue.
- Many people neglect flossing and fail to understand its importance. The spaces between your teeth can never be cleaned by brushing alone- this can only be done with proper daily flossing.
- For denture wearers, proper oral hygiene involves cleaning the gums and mouth with a soft toothbrush twice a day. Dentures should be cleaned with a brush and by soaking in a cup of water overnight.

- In areas where fluoridated water may not be available, ask your dental professional for fluoride supplements.
- Avoid paan, supari and betel nut.
- Do not smoke or use other tobacco products and avoid alcohol.
- Avoid too many sweets.
- Visit with your dentist or dental professional on a routine basis (at least every six months).

RESOURCES

National

American Dental Association (ADA)

Phone: (312) 440-2500

Website: www.ada.org

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

Phone: (800) 232-4636

Website: www.cdc.gov/OralHealth

South Asian Health Initiative (SAHI)

Phone: (212) 263-8246

Website: www.med.nyu.edu/sahi

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¹ South Asians Have Higher Levels of Heart Attack Risk Factors at Young Ages. JAMA: 2007 January; (297): 286-294.

² American Dental Association. Available at: www.ada.org. Accessed 28 July 2010.

³ The Use of Tobacco and Betel Quid ('pan') Among Bangladeshi Women in West Yorkshire. Community Dental Health: 1994 March; 11(1):12-16. Available at: www.sawnet.org/health/cancer_abstracts.html#Summers94.

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