what's up?

oral health

INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

What's it all about?

"You're not healthy without good oral health."
—Dr. C. Everett Koop, former U.S. Surgeon General

This is because problems of teeth, gums, or other parts of the mouth are related to other serious illnesses—like diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. Oral health is an essential part of general health. But good oral health means more than just clean teeth!

Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease of childhood—5 times more common than asthma and 7 times more common than hay fever. It can cause pain, and make it difficult to eat, learn, and work. Oral health problems can also affect a teen's looks, self-esteem and social development.

The good news is: the amount of tooth decay found in the general population has decreased greatly in the last three decades, largely due to fluoride in drinking water. Other ways to reduce decay have also become available, such as sealants and new information on nutrition and oral hygiene.

Why does it matter?

Dental decay will only get worse if not treated. The decay can grow deeper, and suddenly start to cause pain and infection.

Gingivitis (or bleeding gums) can lead to sensitive teeth, loose teeth, receding gums, and infection.

Bad breath is linked to poor oral hygiene.

Oral cancer of the mouth or lips affects about 30,000 Americans each year. Oral cancer has one of the lowest 5-year survival rates of all cancers, and it is strongly associated with alcohol and tobacco use. White patches in the mouth, which can be early signs of cancer, have been found in teenagers who use smokeless tobacco.

Injuries to structures in and around the mouth are among the most common of all injuries in children and adolescents, yet they are almost always preventable. Not using protective equipment when biking, skiing, skateboarding, and in-line skating can lead to serious injuries of the teeth, mouth and head.

What are the details?

- 78% of 17-year-olds in the U.S. have at least 1 cavity or filling.
- In a survey of Washington parents in 2004, about 70% reported that their children's oral health was excellent or very good. Of those who reported problems, 50% reported that their teens had problems with dental caries (cavities), 47% reported crooked teeth, and 10% reported oral hygiene problems.
- Adolescents ages 12-17 who are poor, regardless of race or ethnicity, have a higher percentage of untreated decayed teeth than those in higher income groups.
- Among children with unmet health needs (as reported by their parents), 3 times more children need dental care than other medical care.
- In 2004, about 3% of 8th graders, 5% of 10th graders, and 8% of 12th graders reported they used chewing tobacco, snuff, or dip in the past 30 days.
- According to the 2004 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, about 1-in-4 students (8th, 10th, and 12th graders), reported that they had not been to a dentist in the past 12 months.
- Nationally, over 51 million hours of school were missed in 1 year by school-age children due to a dental problem or visit.

What can I do?

Teens need to continue the good oral hygiene habits that were started in childhood:

- Brush with a fluoride toothpaste twice a day.
- Floss teeth once a day.
- See a dental professional every six months or as recommended.

Dental sealants are very effective in preventing tooth decay. They are usually offered to young children, but can be used for adolescents and adults. Sealants applied during childhood should now be checked by a dentist, who may recommend applying new sealants to permanent molars.

Find out if your teenager's usual source of drinking water is fluoridated. If not, ask your dentist about fluoride varnishes or supplements.

Nutrition matters! Be a role model. Encourage teens to eat regular nutritious meals and to make smart food choices.

Help your teens learn to say NO to tobacco and alcohol. If you need help, ask for it.

Be sure your teen uses a mouth guard and helmet to prevent injuries during sports activities.

Encourage your teens to start taking responsibility for their own dental appointments and care.

Other Issues in Teen Oral Health

Appearance and self-image are important to teens. Love them as they are, and support their desires to be attractive in healthy ways. Let them know that crooked, crowded, or discolored teeth can be improved with help from dentists or orthodontists.

Bad breath is a curable problem caused by strong foods, smoking, alcohol, stomach disorders, bacteria or other medical problems. Brushing and flossing 2-3 times a day will help prevent bad breath. Tongue brushing or scraping also helps.

Tobacco and alcohol, used in combination, cause 90% of oral and throat cancers. Using tobacco in any form causes multiple health problems, and is the main risk factor for oral cancer.

Oral piercings carry the risk of infections from hepatitis, HIV, and tetanus. Piercing the tongue can cause bleeding, choking, and swelling of the throat serious enough to block the airway. Some infections in the mouth can spread quickly to the heart and bloodstream and become very serious or even fatal.

Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia can cause severe overall health problems, as well as permanent loss of tooth enamel. Professional help is needed for these conditions.

Pregnancy and sex have implications for oral health. Some sexually transmitted infections can be spread by oral/oral and oral/genital contact. Tooth decay is an infectious disease that can be transmitted from mothers to infants. Periodontal disease in the mother may increase the chances of premature or low birth weight births. Improving the oral health of the pregnant woman improves the oral health of the infant, and can reduce the risk for early childhood caries.

hot links!

American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry–Facts and tips for teenage patients
http://www.aapd.org/publications/brochures/teenage.asp

American Dental Association–Cleaning your teeth and gums
http://www.ada.org/public/topics/cleaning.asp

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention–Oral health resources
http://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/

Children's Dental Health Project–Adolescent oral health project
http://www.cdhp.org/ (click on Projects to go to Awesome Smiles)

National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center–Toolbox for families
http://www.mchoralhealth.org/Toolbox/families.html

Washington State Department of Health–Child and adolescent oral health
http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/mch/cahcp/

Washington Dental Service Foundation–Dental health information
http://www.ddpwa.com/oralhealth/o_1.htm

Washington State Department of Health
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www.doh.wa.gov

Resources listed here are provided as a public service and do not imply endorsement by the State of Washington.

References for source materials are available from the Child and Adolescent Health program, 360-236-3547.

For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. Please call 1-800-525-0127.

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