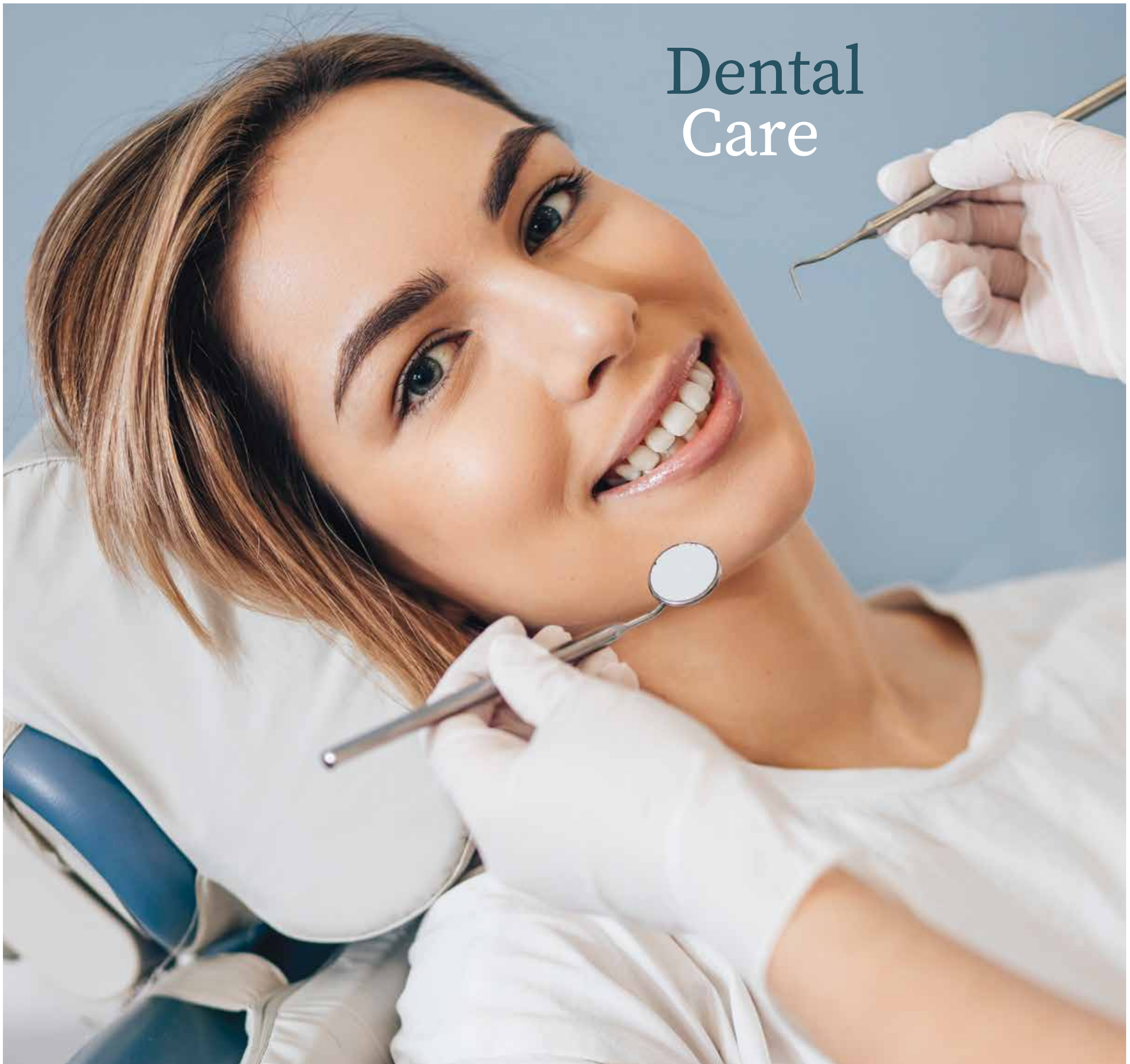


Dental Care



Importance of Regular Checkups

Visiting the dentist on a regular basis forms the foundation of a bright smile, white teeth and healthy gums.

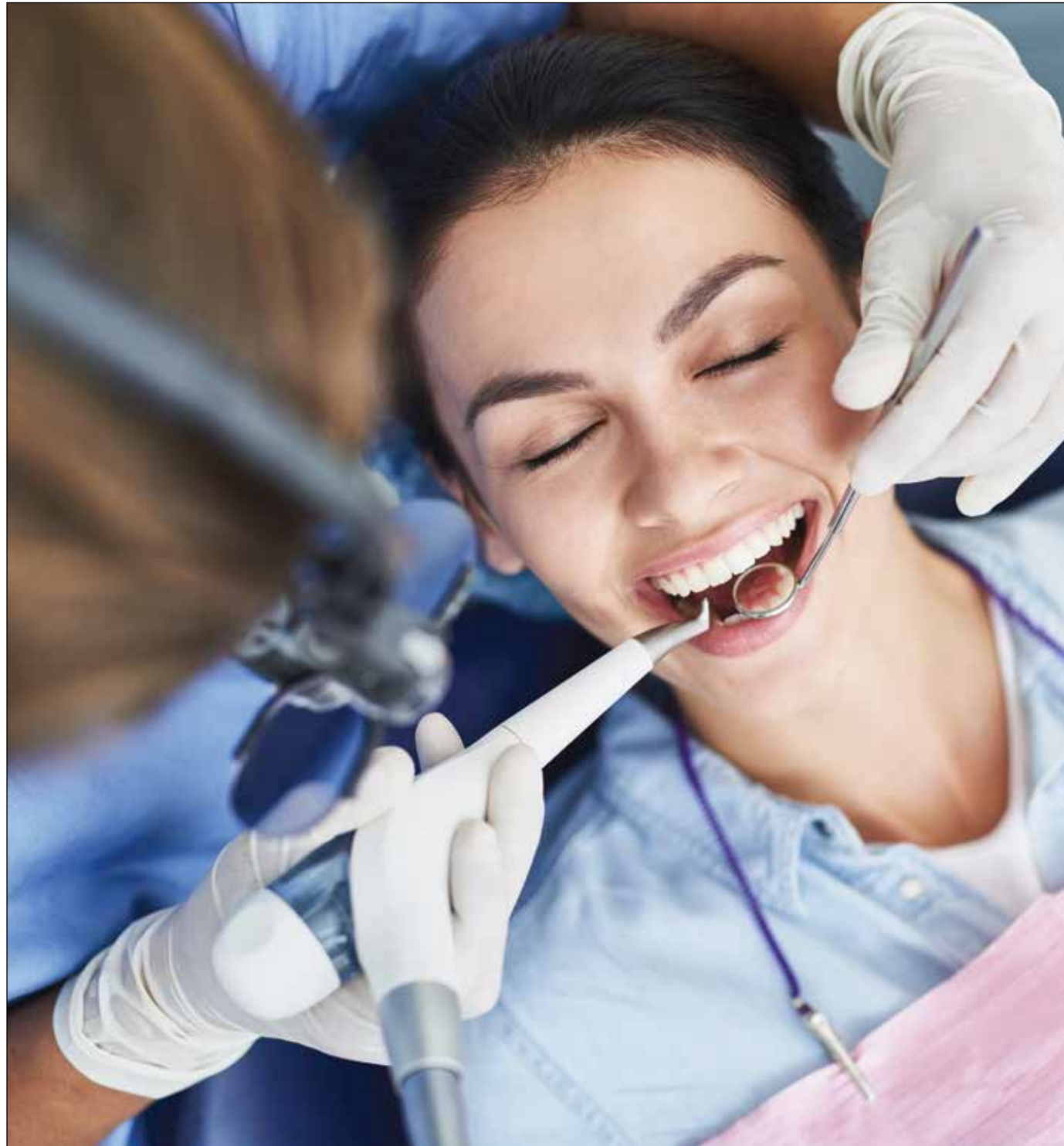
Making (and showing up for) those twice-annual appointments helps to maintain good oral health and prevent dental problems.

While it's easy to delay or skip these appointments due to busy schedules, the long-term benefits of routine dental visits far outweigh the inconvenience. Whether it's for early detection of issues, professional cleaning or overall prevention, regular dental checkups play a vital role in ensuring that your teeth and gums stay healthy.

EARLY DETECTION OF DENTAL PROBLEMS

One of the most important reasons to schedule regular dental checkups is early detection. Many dental issues, such as cavities, gum disease and even oral cancer, don't present noticeable symptoms in their early stages. By the time discomfort or pain arises, the problem may have progressed, requiring more extensive treatment. During a routine checkup, your dentist can identify early signs of these conditions and address them before they worsen.

For example, a small cavity can be treated with a simple filling, but if left untreated, it



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could require more invasive procedures like a root canal or even a tooth extraction. Similarly, early stage gum disease (gingivitis) can be reversed with proper care, while advanced gum disease (periodontitis) may lead to tooth loss.

PROFESSIONAL CLEANING

Even with regular brushing and flossing, it's nearly impossible to remove all plaque and tartar from your teeth. Plaque, a sticky film of bacteria, can harden into tartar, which

cannot be removed by brushing alone. During a dental checkup, your dentist or dental hygienist will perform a professional cleaning to remove plaque and tartar, reducing your risk of cavities and gum disease.

Professional cleanings brighten your smile by removing surface stains caused by coffee, tea and other foods. Clean teeth look better and contribute to fresher breath and improved oral hygiene.

PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

Routine dental visits aren't just about treating existing problems; they're also about prevention. Your dentist can guide you on how to maintain good oral health at home, including proper brushing and flossing techniques, diet recommendations and advice on the best oral care products.

Preventive care during checkups can include fluoride treatments, which strengthen your tooth enamel and reduce your risk of decay, and dental sealants, which provide a protective barrier on your molars to prevent cavities.

MONITORING OVERALL HEALTH

Your oral health is closely connected to your overall health. Conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and osteoporosis can manifest symptoms in the mouth. Dentists are trained to spot these signs and may recommend seeing a medical doctor if something unusual is detected during an exam. Additionally, maintaining good oral health can lower your risk of developing systemic health issues, as gum disease has been linked to cardiovascular disease and other serious conditions.

Dealing with Dry Mouth

Sometimes it takes more than a drink of water to cure that sticky feeling of dry mouth.

Dry mouth, also known as xerostomia, occurs when your salivary glands don't produce enough saliva to keep your mouth moist.

While it may seem like a minor inconvenience, chronic dry mouth can have serious effects on your oral health, contributing to tooth decay, gum disease and bad breath.

CAUSES

Several factors can contribute to dry mouth, ranging from lifestyle choices to medical conditions. Common causes include:

- **Medications:** Many prescription and over-the-counter medications list dry mouth as a side effect. These include antihistamines, decongestants, antidepressants and medications for high blood pressure. If you experience dry mouth after starting a new medication, consult your doctor or pharmacist about possible alternatives.

- **Aging:** As people age, they may produce less saliva, either due to natural changes in the body or the increased use of medications. This is why older adults are more prone to experiencing dry mouth.

- **Dehydration:** Not drinking enough water can lead to dehydration, which reduces saliva

production. Factors such as hot weather, exercise or illness can further dehydrate your body and worsen dry mouth symptoms.

- **Medical conditions:** Certain health conditions, including diabetes, autoimmune diseases like Sjögren's syndrome and nerve damage, can interfere with saliva production. Additionally, cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation can damage salivary glands, leading to dry mouth.

- **Lifestyle factors:** Smoking or chewing tobacco, as well as consuming caffeine and alcohol, can dry out the mouth. Breathing through the mouth, especially at night, can reduce saliva levels, resulting in dry mouth upon waking.

SYMPTOMS

In addition to the uncomfortable sensation of dryness, dry mouth can cause other symptoms, including:

- Bad breath.
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing or speaking.
- Dry or sore throat.
- Thick or stringy saliva.
- Cracked lips or sores in the mouth.

Left untreated, dry mouth can increase the risk of cavities, gum disease and oral infections since saliva plays a crucial role in washing away food particles and neutralizing acids in the mouth.

TREATMENTS

Here are several strategies to manage and alleviate the symptoms:

- **Stay hydrated.** Drinking water throughout the day is one of the easiest ways to combat dry mouth. Sip water regularly, especially during meals, to help moisten food and aid in swallowing.

- **Stimulate saliva production.** Chewing sugar-free gum or sucking on sugar-free candies can stimulate saliva flow. Products containing xylitol are particularly effective in promoting saliva production while also helping to protect against cavities.

- **Use artificial saliva products.** Over-the-counter artificial saliva substitutes, such as mouth sprays, rinses or gels, can help keep your mouth moist. These products mimic the effects of natural saliva and provide temporary relief.

- **Avoid drying substances.** Reduce or eliminate tobacco, alcohol and caffeine, as these can exacerbate dry mouth. Also, steer clear of overly salty or spicy foods, which can irritate a dry mouth.

- **Humidify your home.** Using a humidifier, particularly at night, can add moisture to the air and help relieve dry mouth, especially if you tend to breathe through your mouth while sleeping.

- **Talk to your doctor or dentist.** If dry mouth is caused by a medication or an underlying medical condition, consult your healthcare provider for alternatives or specific treatments. Your dentist can also offer advice and may prescribe fluoride treatments to protect your teeth from decay.



Caring for Your Gums

Healthy gums are the foundation of a beautiful smile and play a critical role in maintaining overall oral health.

Gum disease, also known as periodontal disease, is one of the most common dental issues, and it can lead to serious problems like tooth loss if left untreated. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that about one in two men and one in three women 30 years or older have had some level of periodontitis. It becomes more common as people age.

Periodontal disease is an umbrella term referring to any condition involving inflammation and infection of the tissues that surround and support the teeth. Gingivitis is largely preventable, while periodontitis is an irreversible condition involving bone loss around teeth.

With proper care, you can maintain strong, healthy gums throughout your life.

BRUSH PROPERLY

Brushing your teeth twice a day is essential for gum health. It helps remove plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that forms on your teeth and gums and can lead to gum disease if not removed.

Use a soft-bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste, and be sure to brush gently in circular motions. Don't forget to angle the toothbrush toward the gum



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line, where plaque tends to accumulate. Brushing too hard can damage your gums, so be gentle but thorough.

FLOSS DAILY

Flossing is just as important as brushing when it comes to gum care. It removes food particles and plaque from between your teeth, where your toothbrush can't reach. If left there, this debris can cause gum

inflammation and lead to gingivitis, the early stage of gum disease.

Make flossing a daily habit to keep your gums clean and healthy. If you find traditional floss difficult to use, consider alternatives like floss picks or water flossers.

USE AN ANTIBACTERIAL MOUTHWASH

Incorporating an antibac-

terial mouthwash into your oral care routine can provide extra protection for your gums. Mouthwash helps reduce the bacteria in your mouth, prevent plaque buildup and reduce inflammation. It can reach areas your toothbrush and floss might miss, making it a helpful addition to your gum care regimen. Look for mouthwashes that are designed to promote gum health, and use

them as directed.

MAINTAIN A HEALTHY DIET

What you eat plays a significant role in the health of your gums. A diet rich in vitamins and minerals, particularly vitamin C and calcium, helps keep your gums healthy and your teeth strong. Avoid excessive sugary snacks and drinks, as they can lead to plaque buildup, which irritates the gums. Instead, opt for fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains that support overall dental health.

REGULAR DENTAL CHECKUPS

Even with the best at-home care, regular dental visits are a key factor in maintaining healthy gums. Dentists can spot early signs of gum disease and address any problems before they worsen. Professional cleanings remove tartar (hardened plaque) that can't be removed by brushing and flossing alone. Aim for at least two checkups a year, or more if recommended by your dentist.

AVOID SMOKING

Smoking is one of the leading risk factors for gum disease. It weakens your immune system, making it harder for your gums to fight off infections. It also reduces blood flow to the gums, slowing healing. Quitting smoking is one of the most important steps you can take to protect your gums and improve your overall oral and general health.

Hormone Changes and Oral Health

Teeth may not be the first thing you think about when you are going through hormonal changes at any stage in your life. Yet, those pesky hormones can mess with your dental health just as it does the rest of your body.

From puberty to pregnancy and menopause, fluctuations in hormone levels can increase the risk of oral health issues.

PUBERTY

During puberty, both boys and girls experience a surge in sex hormones like estrogen and testosterone. These hormonal changes can lead to increased blood flow to the gums, making them more sensitive to irritation and plaque buildup. This can result in swollen, red and bleeding gums, a condition known as puberty gingivitis.

For teenagers, maintaining proper oral hygiene counteracts these effects. Brushing and flossing regularly, along with professional cleanings, can help prevent gum disease and other oral health problems during this phase of life.

MENSTRUATION

Hormonal changes related to the menstrual cycle can also



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affect dental health. Many women experience swollen or bleeding gums, canker sores, or an increase in plaque during their periods. This condition, often referred to as menstruation gingivitis, typically appears a few days before menstruation begins and resolves once the period ends.

To minimize discomfort, maintain good oral hygiene during this time. Reduce gum irritation by such activities as using a soft-bristled toothbrush, flossing gently and avoiding sugary foods.

PREGNANCY

Pregnancy is one of the

most significant life stages where hormones dramatically affect oral health. Increased levels of progesterone and estrogen can make the gums more prone to inflammation and infection, leading to pregnancy gingivitis. Symptoms include red, swollen and bleeding gums, which may worsen as the pregnancy progresses.

Pregnant women are at a higher risk for developing a condition called pregnancy tumors—non-cancerous growths on the gums that can cause discomfort but typically disappear after childbirth. Additionally, morning

sickness can expose teeth to stomach acid, which may weaken enamel and increase the risk of cavities.

Attend regular dental visits during pregnancy. Dental professionals can monitor and treat any issues before they become severe. Practicing good oral hygiene, including brushing twice daily and flossing, contributes to both the mother's and baby's health.

MENOPAUSE

During menopause, the decline in estrogen levels can lead to several oral health issues, including dry mouth,

burning sensations in the mouth, and increased risk of gum disease.

Dry mouth, in particular, can be problematic because saliva is crucial for neutralizing acids and washing away food particles that lead to tooth decay.

Women going through menopause should consult their dentist about potential treatments for dry mouth, such as saliva substitutes or medications. Staying hydrated, using fluoride toothpaste and continuing regular dental checkups help to manage oral health during menopause.

Warning Signs and Prevention

Oral cancer is a serious health concern that affects thousands of people each year.

It can develop in any part of the mouth, including the lips, gums, tongue, inner lining of the cheeks and roof or floor of the mouth.

Oral cancer, also referred to as mouth cancer, is a type of head and neck cancer that occurs when abnormal cells grow uncontrollably in the tissues of the mouth. Most oral cancers are classified as squamous cell carcinomas, which develop in the flat, thin cells lining the mouth and throat.

According to the American Cancer Society, oral cancer is on the rise, linked to a rise in human papillomavirus (HPV) infections. In 2024, there were about 58,450 new cases of oral cancer as of September and about 12,230 deaths. The average age of people diagnosed with these cancers is 64, but just over 20% occur in people younger than 55. Men are more at risk than women.

If left untreated, oral cancer can spread to other parts of the body, including the lymph nodes, making treatment more complicated and less effective. The good news is that when caught early, oral cancer is highly treatable.

WARNING SIGNS

Recognizing the symptoms of oral cancer is vital for early



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detection. While some signs may seem harmless at first, it's important to pay attention to any persistent changes in your mouth.

- Non-healing sores or ulcers in the mouth that persist for more than two weeks could be a sign of oral cancer. These sores are often painless at first but may become painful over time.

- Red or white patches inside the mouth or on the lips that don't go away can indicate abnormal cell growth. These patches, known as leukoplakia (white) or erythroplakia (red), should be examined by a dentist or doctor.

- A lump, thickening or

rough spot in the mouth, gums, or throat that doesn't go away may be a symptom of oral cancer.

- Persistent pain or difficulty when swallowing, chewing or moving the jaw or tongue should not be ignored.

- Unexplained bleeding in the mouth, especially if accompanied by any of the other symptoms, could be a warning sign of oral cancer.

- Numbness, tenderness, or pain in the mouth, face or neck that doesn't resolve may signal an underlying problem.

- A chronic sore throat or hoarseness, as well as changes in your voice, can sometimes be linked to oral or throat cancer.

If you notice any of these symptoms, see a dentist or doctor as soon as possible. Early intervention increases the chances of successful treatment and recovery.

RISK FACTORS

Several factors increase the risk of developing oral cancer, some of which are within your control.

Smoking cigarettes, cigars or pipes, as well as using smokeless tobacco, is one of the leading causes of oral cancer. Tobacco users are significantly more likely to develop cancer than non-users.

Heavy alcohol consumption is another major risk factor

for oral cancer. The combination of smoking and alcohol use further increases the risk.

The human papillomavirus (HPV), particularly the HPV-16 strain, has been linked to oral and throat cancers. The virus is transmitted through oral sex and is now a leading cause of oral cancer in younger populations.

Prolonged exposure to the sun without protection increases the risk of cancer on the lips. Wearing sunscreen or lip balm with SPF can help reduce this risk.

Poor dental care and chronic irritation from ill-fitting dentures or broken teeth may contribute to the development of oral cancer.

Proper Care for Dentures

When one's adult teeth start to fall out, dentures are often the go-to solution. According to some studies, an average of 19% of the worldwide population wears some form of dentures.

Whether you have full or partial dentures, proper care will make sure they last as long as they should and that your mouth stays healthy. Regular cleaning, handling and maintenance can help prevent discomfort, infections and damage to your dentures.

CLEAN YOUR DENTURES DAILY

Just like natural teeth, dentures require daily cleaning to remove food particles, plaque and bacteria. However, dentures need special care, so avoid using regular toothpaste, which can be too abrasive and cause scratches. Instead, use a soft-bristled denture brush or a soft toothbrush with water or a mild denture cleaner to gently scrub all surfaces of your dentures.

Clean your dentures after every meal, if possible, to remove food debris and prevent the buildup of plaque. Don't forget to clean the rest of your mouth, including your gums, tongue, and the roof of



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your mouth, to promote overall oral health.

SOAK DENTURES OVERNIGHT

Dentures need to stay moist to retain their shape and flexibility. When you remove them at night, place them in a glass of water or a mild denture-soaking solution. Avoid soaking dentures in hot water, as this can warp the material. By keeping them in a wet environment, you ensure that your dentures stay comfortable and functional for longer.

Additionally, soaking helps disinfect the dentures and

remove any remaining bacteria or plaque, contributing to better oral hygiene.

HANDLE DENTURES WITH CARE

Dentures are delicate and can break if mishandled. Always hold your dentures over a soft towel or a sink filled with water when cleaning or handling them to prevent damage if they are accidentally dropped.

When removing or inserting your dentures, follow your dentist's instructions carefully to avoid bending or damaging the plastic or metal clasps.

VISIT YOUR DENTIST REGULARLY

Having dentures doesn't get you out of regular dental checkups. Your dentist will examine your dentures and the tissues in your mouth to ensure everything is in good condition. Over time, the shape of your gums and jawbone may change, affecting the fit of your dentures. If they become loose or uncomfortable, your dentist can make adjustments or recommend a relining to improve the fit.

Ignoring ill-fitting dentures can lead to sore spots,

infections and difficulty eating or speaking, so address any discomfort promptly.

AVOID DIY REPAIRS

If your dentures break or crack, resist the urge to fix them yourself with glue or other household adhesives. These substances are not designed for oral use and can be harmful. Instead, contact your dentist. Denture damage is often fixable, but improper repairs can lead to further problems and may require the replacement of the dentures altogether.

What to Expect: A Root Canal

When a toothache gets severe, the solution is sometimes a root canal — a dental procedure that treats infection or damage in the pulp of a tooth.

While many people associate the term “root canal” with pain, the procedure is designed to relieve discomfort and save the natural tooth.

With advances in modern dentistry, root canals are relatively straightforward and are often no more uncomfortable than getting a filling.

A root canal becomes necessary when the pulp of the tooth, which contains nerves and blood vessels, becomes infected or inflamed. This can happen due to deep decay, repeated dental procedures on the tooth, a crack or chip or trauma. When the pulp is infected, it can cause significant pain and lead to an abscess, which can further damage the surrounding tissue and bone.

Common symptoms include persistent tooth pain, sensitivity to hot and cold, swollen or tender gums and darkening of the tooth. If left untreated, the infection can spread and may result in the loss of the tooth.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Your dentist or endodontist will first examine the tooth and take X-rays to assess the extent of the infection or damage. This helps them determine the best course of action.

Before the procedure begins, a local anesthetic will be administered to numb the area around the affected tooth. This ensures that you won't feel pain during the root canal. If you're feeling particularly anxious, your



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dentist may offer a sedative to help you relax.

Once the tooth is numb, the dentist will create a small opening in the crown of the tooth to access the pulp. Using specialized tools, they will carefully remove the infected or damaged pulp. They then clean and disinfect the inside of the tooth to ensure that no bacteria remain.

After removing the pulp and cleaning the tooth, the dentist will fill the root canals with a rubber-like material called gutta-percha. This seals the

space and prevents future infection.

In most cases, the dentist will place a temporary filling in the tooth while waiting for a permanent restoration.

To restore the strength and function of the tooth, a dentist will usually place a crown over it. This crown protects the tooth and matches the appearance of your natural teeth. In some cases, the dentist may use a filling instead of a crown, but a crown is typically recommended for teeth in the back of the mouth that endure more pressure from chewing.

RECOVERY AND AFTERCARE

After the root canal, you may experience mild discomfort or sensitivity for a few days, which can usually be managed with over-the-counter pain relievers. Avoid chewing on the treated tooth until the crown is placed to prevent damage. Maintain good oral hygiene — brushing, flossing and regular dental visits — to keep the treated tooth and surrounding teeth healthy.

In most cases, a tooth that has undergone a root canal can last a lifetime with proper care.