

# Benefits Spotlight

News for *You*. News to *Share* with your Employees.

## Consumer Dental Trends: The Good, Bad and Ugly

The at-home pillars of dental hygiene have stood the test of time: Brush twice daily and floss daily. But sometimes the need to spice up our oral health routines arises. Perhaps a natural teeth whitening trend sparks our curiosities, or a product that we can readily find in our kitchen pantry promises to be the secret to fresh breath and healthy gums.

As more people seek natural products and solutions, DIY dentistry has gained popularity in recent years. But despite claims of being pure or food-based, these trends aren't necessarily good for your dental health. And, in some cases, they should be avoided.

Here's a breakdown of where three trends fall on the good, bad and ugly scale for your dental health:

### GOOD

One of the best things people are doing nowadays for their dental health is not smoking. In Iowa, smoking rates have dropped from 23.2% in 2000 to 16.6% in 2018, according to the Iowa Department of Public Health.

This is good news: Tobacco use puts you at higher risk for several oral health problems, including being a main cause of severe gum disease (which can lead to tooth loss).

### BAD

One of the popular trends claiming to whiten teeth is applying citrus (like lemon) and baking soda to your teeth. These ingredients seem harmless, even healthy. But combining them produces citric acid, and too much acid on your teeth can wear away your enamel (the white outer layer of your teeth). When you wear this enamel down, your risk for tooth sensitivity and cavities increases. And when your enamel goes away, you can't get it back.

Fruit is an excellent choice to include in your daily diet, but it's best not to use them as a replacement for brushing.

### UGLY

Brushing your teeth with activated charcoal is one of the more bizarre dental trends to pop up, but brushing with charcoal powders and toothpaste became popular as a natural way to whiten and clean teeth. However, no evidence exists to show charcoal as a safe and effective teeth cleaning product.

Charcoal, even when it is in a powder form, is abrasive and can wear down your enamel. If you're looking for a whiter smile, your enamel is what you want to whiten, but if you wear it down, it will expose your dentin layer, which has a yellow-ish appearance. So, charcoal brushing could do the opposite of giving you a white smile.

### **Always in Style: Seeing Your Dentist Twice Yearly**

Your oral health is important — and taking good care of it means you're taking good care of your overall health, too. Dental health trends may seem harmless, but that's not always the case. This is especially true if you're using fads as a substitute for daily brushing and flossing.

One of the best things you can do for your oral health is see your dentist twice a year for preventive dental visits. These appointments are a great opportunity for you to share your interest in natural dental health products with your dentist. If there is a product or practice you'd like to start using or doing, it's best to discuss it first with your dentist. Getting the stamp of approval from your dentist will give you the assurance that you're going the safe and effective route.

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## **Dental Health Guide for Women Over 50**

Turning 50 is a significant milestone for all of us. But for women, this season of life brings a lot of change that can be challenging to navigate.

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Most women experience menopause between age 51 and 52. The hallmark of menopause is sharp hormonal shifts — and these hormonal changes affect many aspects of your health, including your dental health.

Here, we share how menopause may affect your teeth and mouth, and how you can minimize the effects and preserve a great quality of life.

### **Menopause and Your Dental Health**

One of the most common dental health complications associated with menopause is dry mouth. During menopause, your body reduces production of estrogen and progesterone, which are two hormones that (among many other things) affect your ability to produce as much saliva as you did before. Saliva has a lot of benefits to your oral health outside of simply keeping your mouth comfortable: It protects against tooth decay, gum disease and even bad breath.

Aside from menopause, you may find that medications you're taking can cause dry mouth, too.

If you have dry mouth, drinking more water will help. But if you're finding that increasing your water intake alone isn't doing enough, talk to your dentist. He or she will share additional ways you can combat dry mouth.

Another lesser-known condition related to menopause is burning mouth syndrome, which is a burning sensation that can extend from your tongue to your lips, gums, cheeks and throat.

If you are experiencing this burning sensation or any other type of pain, talk to your dentist about ways to relieve it. It's also a good idea to tell your dentist if you are going through menopause. The more your dentist knows about your overall health, the better he or she will be able to treat you.

### **Osteoporosis Risk and Tooth Loss**

Osteoporosis, a disease marked by weakened bones and bone loss, is a major health concern for post-menopausal women. In fact, 80% of the 10 million Americans with osteoporosis are women. It's easy to lose sight of the fact that your teeth are bones, so this condition affects your oral health, too.

Menopause increases your risk for osteoporosis because estrogen is a bone-protecting hormone, and as estrogen drops, your bones lose that protection. This makes your bones susceptible to weakening. In some cases, a simple fall could result in a bone breaking.

Having osteoporosis boosts your risk of losing a tooth by three times. Bone loss in your jaw also increases your gum disease risk. If you have osteoporosis, please make sure your dentist is aware.

Fortunately, there is a lot of you can do to strengthen your bones and keep them healthy throughout menopause and beyond:

- Eating a balanced diet that includes foods rich in bone-building calcium and vitamin D, such as dairy products, spinach and salmon.
- Staying active by walking, swimming and strength training (lifting weights).
- Don't smoke.
- Limit alcohol to one drink a day.

Maintaining great oral healthcare at home by brushing and flossing will also continue to keep your teeth healthy between dental visits.

### **Certain Oral Health Risks Increase with Age**

Getting older brings wisdom and perhaps some much-earned relaxation, but it also puts you at greater risk for certain health conditions. Specific to your dental health, 68% of adults 65 and older have gum disease, 20% have untreated tooth decay and nearly all have had a cavity.

Simply getting older also increases your risk of oral cancer, with the median age at diagnosis being 62 years old. Although men are at a greater risk for oral cancer than women, smoking and drinking alcohol increase the risk for both men and women.

## **Seeing Your Dentist Is Your Best Defense**

Getting older comes with a new set of health concerns, but some simple strategies can prevent them from interfering with your life. For example, drinking plenty of water is a tried-and-true health practice that will continue to serve you well throughout the years. Another good piece of advice is to talk to your doctor about the side effects associated with any new medications; many medications can cause dental health issues, such as dry mouth, so being prepared with a plan for addressing it will help.

Lastly, maintaining your twice-yearly preventive visits with your dentist is crucial to keeping good oral health. Since original Medicare does not cover routine dental care, consider whether an individual plan or Medicare Advantage with dental is right for you during retirement. Most Delta Dental of Iowa plans cover 100% of preventive dental visits.

These visits not only help your dentist identify any problems early but are also a good opportunity to tell your dentist about any pain or other symptoms (lumps, swelling, etc.) that you're experiencing. Your dentist will help find a solution to get you back to enjoying your life to the fullest.

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