

Tobacco and dental health

great american smokeout challenge:

A good oral health routine can start today.



Tobacco use has detrimental effects on your health. Cancer, heart disease, stroke and pregnancy complications are just a few possible ailments. To increase awareness of the dangers of smoking, the American Cancer Society sponsors the Great American Smokeout every year in November. Americans are encouraged to quit smoking for a day or to encourage someone else to quit for a day. The idea is to help someone be smoke-free for a day in hopes of motivating that person to quit forever.

Using tobacco can also harm your mouth, including your teeth and gums. Some people may think that safe forms of tobacco exist. The truth is that there is no safe form of tobacco—using it produces many problems, from tooth discoloration and gum disease to throat, lung and oral cancer and even death. It's important to understand what happens to your mouth when you use any form of tobacco, and to discuss those effects—and how to quit—with your physician and dentist.

What are the effects on the mouth?

In addition to its effects on overall health, tobacco can have a significant impact on oral health and can affect the mouth in the following ways:

- Oral cancer
- Bad breath
- Stained teeth
- Loss of taste
- Less success with dental implants
- Mouth sores

Smoking reduces the amount of saliva that flows through your mouth. Saliva is important for cleaning your mouth and preventing tooth decay.

The effects of tobacco also show on your teeth. Nicotine and tar, the major ingredients of cigarettes, discolor your teeth—causing yellow and brown stains and sticky tar deposits. Inflammation of the roof of your mouth, decreased effect of taste buds and offensive smelling breath are other common consequences of tobacco use.

Perhaps most importantly, tobacco products are a leading cause of oral cancer. Each year, oral cancer claims as many lives as skin cancer (melanoma) and more than cervical cancer. Oral cancer is the sixth most commonly diagnosed form of cancer in the United States. Presently, 35,000 patients are diagnosed annually with oral cancer. The five-year survival rate is only 60 percent, accounting for 7,500 deaths each year.

Can tobacco also affect periodontal (gum disease)?

Smoking reduces blood flow and the supply of vital nutrients to your gums, including vitamin C. Without the proper nutrients, you can develop gum disease, bone loss and even tooth loss. This is because smoking triggers the accumulation of bacteria in plaque, resulting in the following problems:

- Calculus – plaque that hardens on your teeth and can only be removed during a professional cleaning
- Deep pockets between your teeth and gums
- Loss of the bone and tissue that support your teeth

By Michael D. Weitzner
DMD, MS

Vice President, UnitedHealthcare
Clinical Product Development

UnitedHealthcare Dental®

If the calculus is not removed during a professional cleaning, and it remains below your gum line, the bacteria in the calculus can destroy your gum tissue and cause your gums to pull away from your teeth. When this happens, periodontal pockets form and fill with disease-causing bacteria.

If left untreated, periodontal disease will progress. The pockets between your teeth and gums can grow deeper, allowing in more bacteria that destroy tissue and supporting bone. As a result, the gums may shrink away from the teeth making them look longer. Without treatment, your teeth may become loose, painful and even fall out.

To add to the challenge, the detection of periodontal diseases is often more difficult in tobacco users. The nicotine and other chemicals found in tobacco hide the symptoms commonly associated with periodontal diseases, such as bleeding gums. Difficult detection can lead to delayed discovery and treatment.

Evidence shows that gum diseases and tobacco can impact overall health. In an article published by the Academy of Periodontology in 2002, "The Role of Cigarette Smoking in the Association Between Periodontal Disease and Coronary Heart Disease", researchers note that cigarette smoking is a factor in the relationship between periodontal disease and coronary heart disease.

What about other forms of tobacco besides cigarettes?

Cigars and pipes contain the same toxic and carcinogenic compounds as cigarettes. Even when cigar or pipe smoke isn't inhaled, they are not safe alternatives. Regular cigar or pipe smoking increases the risk for oral cancers, lung cancer, and larynx and esophageal cancers.

Smokeless tobacco is also not a safe alternative. Smokeless tobacco—which includes snuff, dip, or chewing tobacco—eats away at your gums, greatly increasing the chances for gum disease. You are much more likely to develop oral cancer from chewing tobacco, particularly in the area of your mouth where you place the tobacco.

What can I do to get started?

Talk to your physician or dentist about beginning a tobacco cessation program. Other suggestions include:

- Pick a stress-free time to quit.
- Ask for support and encouragement from family, friends and colleagues.
- Start some form of exercise or activity each day to relieve stress and improve your health.
- Get plenty of rest and eat a well-balanced diet.
- Join a smoking cessation program or other support group.
- Change your daily routine and spend more time in places where smoking is prohibited.
- Keep oral substitutes handy such as carrots, apples or sugarless gum.

Once you have made the steps toward quitting, it is important to improve your dental hygiene with regular brushing and flossing. It is advised for smokers to get a professional cleaning (scaling and polishing) for the removal of stains. But without quitting, the cleaning and stain removal will have only a temporary effect. You should go for regular dental checkups every six months if you haven't been going or keep going if you have.

Quitting any tobacco habit is not easy. The most effective way to quit tobacco is to have a quit date and plan. Successful quitters also include support teams in their plan— friends, family and co-workers who can help during the difficult times when urges and temptations are strongest. It's never too late to start a good habit. Let the Great American Smokeout Challenge be your jumpstart to a healthy mouth, body and smile! A healthier you begins with the first step.

Sources

Academy of General Dentistry. Fact Sheet: Effects of Smoking on the Mouth, AGD Impact, August 2008.

American Academy of Periodontology. Tobacco Use and Periodontal Disease, AAP, posted 2008.

American Academy of Periodontology. Targeting Tobacco Use, AAP, posted 2008.

Hyman JJ et al. The Role of Cigarette Smoking in the Association Between Periodontal Disease and Coronary Heart Disease, *Journal of Periodontology*, Vol. 73, No. 9, Pages 988-994, September 2002.

National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Research. Spit Tobacco: A Guide for Quitting, NIH, posted 2008.

National Institute of Health, Patient Care Pamphlet: Oral Cancer. Page Updated Sept. 25, 2008.

National Cancer Institute. Fact Sheet: Smokeless Tobacco and Cancer, Questions and Answers. Reviewed May 30, 2003.

UnitedHealthcare Dental®

UnitedHealthcare Dental® coverage provided by or through UnitedHealthcare Insurance Company or its affiliates. Administrative services provided by Dental Benefit Providers, Inc., Dental Benefit Administrative Services (CA only), United HealthCare Services, Inc. or their affiliates. Plans sold in Texas use policy form number DPOL.06.TX (11/15/2006) and associated COC form number DCOC.CER.06.