

Dental Health

THE BASIC FACTS

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS



Kim, diagnosed in 1986

People with a chronic disease may neglect their general health and wellness, research shows. Dental care is no exception. A tendency to focus on MS-related needs may divert people's attention from appropriate dental care. People with significant fatigue and/or mobility impairment may find office visits beyond those required for their MS care to be particularly difficult to manage.

The basic fact is healthy teeth and gums are essential for:

- Preventing infections which may cause MS symptoms to increase
- Promoting good digestion and proper nutrition
- Enhancing the enjoyment of food and social activities
- Maintaining appearance

Elements of good care

Diligent routine care can help prevent dental problems. Your dental care routine should involve:

- Brushing twice daily: after breakfast and before bedtime
- Using a tooth-paste with fluoride in it
- Flossing daily
- Using a tongue scraper or brushing the tongue daily

- Eating a well-balanced diet without excessive sweets
- Scheduling regular dental visits, usually every 6 months
- Replacing your toothbrush at least every 3 to 4 months
- Promptly reporting any bleeding gums, tooth or jaw pain or tooth sensitivity

Routine dental visits

During the regularly-scheduled checkups, the dentist inspects your teeth, gums, tongue, and throat. A typical dental examination involves:

- An oral cancer screening which includes examining your face, neck, lymph nodes, soft tissues, and jaw joints (“TMJ”s)
- Looking for loose or broken teeth, or damaged fillings
- Checking for gum disease
- X-raying your teeth for signs of decay or damage
- Inspecting your bite
- Checking any dental appliances you might have (bridge, night guard, bite plate)
- Cleaning (to remove plaque and tartar), polishing, and flossing your teeth
- Reviewing brushing and flossing techniques
- Scheduling any needed dental treatment (Note: There are no restrictions on the type of anesthesia that can be used for a person with MS during dental procedures; you and your dentist can choose whichever type of anesthesia is most comfortable for you.)

Common dental problems that may be identified

During the examination the dentist will look for:

- Caries or tooth decay—also known as “cavities” because holes develop in the tooth enamel
- Periodontal disease, which causes inflamed and infected gums
- Bruxism, which occurs when a person clenches his or her jaws or “grinds” teeth, usually during the night
- Malocclusion, when the upper and lower jaw do not close properly

Caries and periodontitis are infections, each of which can be made worse by bruxism and malocclusion.

Dental care and MS symptoms

There are several symptoms of MS that can interfere with adequate care of the teeth and gums. Fatigue, spasticity, weakness, tremor, facial pain (trigeminal neuralgia) and sensory changes (numbness, tingling, and/or pain) in the hands can all challenge a person’s efforts to brush and floss adequately. The following strategies and assistive devices can compensate for these problems:

- Use toothbrushes with built-up handles (or cut a small slit in the sides of a tennis ball and slide it onto the handle of the toothbrush); use flossing tools; consider electric toothbrushes and flossing devices.
- Sit to brush and floss, if standing at the basin is tiring.
- Floss in the morning if you are too tired at night. Since flossing at bedtime is preferable because it removes bacteria that will multiply while you sleep, try flossing in bed.
- Allow a family member or personal assistant to help with tooth brushing/ flossing.
- Manage tremors by wearing a weighted glove while brushing.

Some medications used to treat MS symptoms can cause dry mouth. Saliva helps to cleanse the mouth and teeth. A dry mouth is not only uncomfortable, it may cause bacteria to accumulate and may also interfere with chewing. In addition, spicy or salty foods may cause pain in a dry mouth. You can minimize the effects of dry mouth by:

- Sipping water or sugarless drinks often
- Avoiding caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol
- Using a small squirt of lemon in the mouth or sugarless lemon candies to stimulate the parotid glands (which control saliva)
- Using a humidifier at night
- Using special products that are available in pharmacies to moisten dry mouth

Dental visits and MS symptoms

Plan to handle the challenges of fatigue, poor balance, spasticity, and/or transportation issues by:

- Finding out ahead of time whether the office building is sufficiently accessible
- Making your special needs known to the office staff before your appointment
- Determining whether the office has a dental chair that is sufficiently accessible for you (keep in mind that persons who use wheelchairs may need other types of assistance as well)
- Getting some extra rest beforehand to compensate for the traveling and the office visit
- Scheduling visits for a time of day when you usually feel the most rested
- Planning to rest upon returning from the dental visit

THE TRUTH ABOUT MERCURY AMALGAM

There have been claims over the years that mercury leaking from amalgam dental fillings damages the immune system and causes a broad range of diseases, including MS. While the cause of MS remains unknown, there is no scientific evidence that heavy metal poisoning is responsible for either the onset or worsening of MS. There is no reason to have your dental fillings removed or replaced. This is a very expensive procedure with no proven benefit for people with MS.

Resources

Academy of General Dentistry

211 East Chicago Avenue Suite 900

Chicago, Illinois 60611

Tel: 888-243-3368

Web site: www.agd.org/patient-resources.aspx

- › Oral health resources
- › Find a dentist
- › Ask a question

American Dental Association

211 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611
Tel: 312-440-2500
Web site: www.mouthhealthy.org/en

- › Current consumer topics
- › A to Z resources
- › Finding a dentist
- › Events and news

Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors

Web site: www.astdd.org

- › Names of dental department heads for every state
- › Contact information for every state dental department of health

National Foundation of Dentistry for the Handicapped

1800 15th Street Suite 100
Denver, Colorado 80202
Tel: 303-534-5360
Web site: <http://dentallifeline.org>

- › Donated Dental Care in 50 States (for the medically compromised, disabled or elderly person who has no means of paying and who needs comprehensive dental work)
- › Dental house calls/van (volunteer dentists make home visits to disabled persons)

WheelchairNet

The RERC (Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center) on Wheeled Mobility
5051 Forbes Tower
University of Pittsburgh
Tel: 412-383-6586
Web site: www.wheelchairnet.org/WCN_Living/Docs/accessibledentistry.html

- › Accessible dentistry for persons who use wheelchairs
- › Consumer tips
- › Resources advocating accessible dental care
- › Architectural accessibility for dental practices
- › Some accessible dental practices
- › Education and training resources
- › Bibliography and journals

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* The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is proud to be a source of information about multiple sclerosis. Our comments are based on professional advice, published experience and expert opinion, but do not represent individual therapeutic recommendation or prescription. For specific information and advice, consult your personal physician.

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