

# Oral Health

## 1. What is oral health?

The word "oral" refers to the mouth, which includes your teeth, gums, jawbone, and supporting tissues. Taking care of your mouth isn't just about preventing cavities or bad breath. Healthy mouth prevents disease and is key to your body's overall health.

## 2. What is oral hygiene?

Oral hygiene is the practice of keeping the mouth and teeth clean to prevent dental problems, such as dental cavities, gum disease, and bad breath.

## 3. What are the most common oral health problems?

The most common oral health problems are **cavities** and **gum disease**. Cavities look like chalky white and/or brown holes on teeth. Bacteria (germs) that naturally live in our mouths use sugar in food to make acids. Over time, the acids destroy the outside layer of your teeth. Then cavities and other problems may occur.

Gum disease is an infection caused by plaque, the sticky film of bacteria that is constantly forming on our teeth. Your risk of gum disease is higher if you:

- Smoke
- Have a disease such as diabetes or HIV/AIDS
- Use methamphetamine
- Are pregnant

Other oral health problems that can occur are bad breath, burning mouth, canker sores, cold sores, dry mouth, oral cancer and thrush.

## 4. Who is affected by oral health problems?

Anyone can be affected by oral health problems. However, the following groups of people are affected more commonly:

- Infants and toddlers (6-24 months)
- School-age kids (6-17 year old)
- Pregnant women
- Older adults
- People with chronic diseases
- People with disabilities
- People who use tobacco products

## 5. How do I prevent oral health problems?

1. Brush your teeth at least twice each day with fluoride toothpaste and floss daily.
2. Have a healthy lifestyle such as eating healthy meals and avoiding tobacco products.
3. Get dental checkups twice a year (every 6 months).
4. Follow your dentist's advice. He or she can teach you how to keep your mouth healthy.
5. If you have another health problem, talk to your dentist about how it may affect your oral health.



### Key Points

- Oral hygiene is the practice of keeping your mouth healthy.
- The most common oral health problems are **cavities** and **gum diseases**.
- Some people are at higher risk for oral health problems.
- Brushing your teeth at least twice a day and getting a dental checkup twice a year can prevent oral health problems.

### More Information

Los Angeles County  
Department of Public Health  
[www.publichealth.lacounty.gov](http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov)

Centers for Disease Control and  
Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov/oralhealth](http://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth)

American Dental Association  
[www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)

QID-OH-0002-01 (01/03/14)