

3 TIPS FOR A HEALTHY MOUTH

Here are three good reasons to pay attention to oral health, especially in the elderly:

- 1) There is a connection between oral health and general health.** Bacteria from tooth decay and infected gums can spread through the body. Oral infections have been linked with diabetes, heart disease, stroke and other serious medical conditions.
- 2) Unhealthy teeth and gums can have a negative effect on nutrition and self-esteem.** A person may skip eating healthy foods if it hurts to chew them. Not chewing food properly can lead to problems swallowing or poor absorption of nutrients during digestion. Poor oral health or missing teeth or ill-fitting dentures can lead to embarrassing conditions like bad breath or unclear speech.
- 3) Certain medications disrupt the flow of saliva.** Saliva helps keep the mouth healthy and aids swallowing and speech.

You can help elderly patients by reminding them—or helping them—to brush their teeth after eating, use a fluoride toothpaste and floss once a day.

Inspect the inside of the mouth regularly. Alert a doctor or dentist promptly if you notice tooth decay; loose or missing teeth; ill-fitting dentures; dry mouth; persistent foul odor; gum irritation, like redness or bleeding; or a growth or sore anywhere in the mouth.



Staying Sharp

Exercise is good for the body and the brain.


Staying physically active is good for the body and the brain. A recent study shows that people who exercise even moderately—like walking 20 to 30 minutes a day—stay mentally sharper than inactive people.

Did you know that a mental workout is good for you, too? Engage in any enjoyable mind-stimulating activity, such as reading, writing, playing games, working puzzles or trying new hobbies, and you may slow the effects of aging on the brain and lower your risk of depression.

Think about how you can introduce a mental workout into the daily lives of those people in your care. Keep in mind that you'll reap the benefits too. A first step is to turn off the TV set and talk to each other. Find out about the person's interests. Does he or she like to play cards or word games, do jigsaw puzzles, write letters or work on crafts?

You'll have to gear the activities to the person's capabilities. For instance, if a person likes to cook but has physical limitations, maybe you can help him or her compile a collection of favorite recipes into a cookbook. Or, for a crossword puzzle buff with failing eyesight, you may need to have some puzzles enlarged—easy to do at the local copy store or library.

More ideas will come as you challenge your own brain. Be creative, and have fun!

 **Researchers are studying the effects of brain exercise. Based on recent findings, exercising your brain with one or more of these activities daily won't stop memory loss, but it may delay it:**

- Reading
- Writing
- Crossword puzzles
- Board or card games
- Group discussions
- Playing music

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FURRY FRIENDS

How would you like a prescription for something that could produce these results in the individuals in your care?

- Help them to relax and feel more secure.
- Reduce their stress.
- Increase their positive social behaviors.
- Reduce their loneliness or depression.
- Lower their high blood pressure.

Would it surprise you if the “prescription” had a soft coat and maybe a wet nose and wagging tail?

The presence of companion animals such as dogs, cats, rabbits and even birds can provide instant comfort. There’s a special emotional bond that forms when a hand gently strokes soft fur or feathers. There’s also the bond of support and acceptance—animals aren’t put off by physical or mental disabilities in humans who show them love.

Some adult-care and nursing homes have adopted healthy, well-adjusted companion animals to live among residents. The animals add a homey touch and are treated as family. Staff members appreciate the animals’ calming, welcoming presence as much as the residents do.

Thinking of something less permanent? There are volunteer organizations—Love on a Leash (loveonaleash.org) is one—that will bring trained companion animals to homes and eldercare facilities for visits. Call your local senior services agency or animal shelter to ask about programs in your area.



Sparks Fly When Generations Connect

Kids and elders both benefit from time together.

Elders and children can be great resources for each other. Why not put them together and let the benefits unfold? That’s the basis of a growing trend called intergenerational (IG) programs—arrangements that make it possible for society’s youngest and oldest generations to connect and blossom.

Think of how many children are in daycare all day long and how many elders spend all day in the company of other older people. Imagine if the two generations got together: children with their excitement and curiosity about the world and seniors with their knowledge and mature caring!

In IG daycare, seniors and kids get together for occasional activities throughout the day. It may be for a sing-along or to share a snack. It may be for one-on-one story sessions, games, gardening, art projects or just to chat about things of interest.

The IG concept is spreading. Some senior assisted living facilities have created space for on-site daycare and kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classrooms. At specific times, children and seniors participating in the IG program mingle as “neighbors.” It’s all done under the watchful eyes of trained program coordinators.

Shared Rewards

For elders, interaction with children can rev up their days and spark their hearts and minds. Elders act as mentors and friends to children. They provide the special attention that kids need and crave. In return, the elders feel needed and appreciated. Self-esteem and personal dignity get a big boost, which can go a long way for seniors who might have been feeling worn out and useless. Even those with mild dementia respond in positive ways to interaction with youngsters.

The kids get an important boost, too. Teachers say that students in IG kindergarten classes are almost a year ahead of non-IG students in social development, language skills, self-confidence and self-esteem.

→ To learn more about IG programs, visit the website of Generations United at gu.org.

Pain Relievers: Use With Caution

Choose the right medication for the pain—and the patient.



Ouch! Pain can be a problem, especially for older people with arthritis. For years, one remedy to reach for has been acetaminophen—the generic name of the drug found in Tylenol, Excedrin and many other over-the-counter (OTC) products and prescription pain relievers, including Percocet and Vicodin.

As a caregiver (and someone who may need a pain reliever yourself on occasion), think before you reach. Too much acetaminophen can cause serious liver damage that may lead to death. Early signs of overdose can be similar to flu symptoms. Be aware.

Trouble Adds Up

Acetaminophen is used in many OTC products for colds, flu, allergies and sleeplessness. A person taking the label-recommended doses of one or more of these products could easily exceed a safe level.

Liver injury from acetaminophen is a greater risk to people who drink alcohol, have existing liver problems or are taking the blood thinner warfarin.

The Food and Drug Administration now requires OTC product labels to warn consumers that acetaminophen can cause serious liver damage. But it's up to you to make sure that the person you're caring for takes only what the doctor says is a safe amount.

What About NSAIDs?

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are another type of pain reliever. OTC examples are aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) and naproxen (Aleve). Celebrex is a prescription NSAID. Be aware that NSAIDs can cause stomach bleeding and kidney damage, especially in people over age 60.

PAIN-RELIEVER SAFETY TIPS

- Discuss safe use of pain relievers with the doctor.
- Check ingredients on package labels of all OTC products.
- Don't combine OTC products or mix them with prescription medicines without checking for safety.
- Consult a pharmacist if you have questions about ingredients and dosage.
- Write down the name, time and dosage of every medicine you give.
- If you suspect an acetaminophen overdose, call 911 or Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 to find out what to do.

SCAM PROTECTION

As a caregiver, you can help protect those you're caring for from becoming victims of financial scams. Elderly and disabled people living on their own are especially vulnerable.

Con artists trick people into turning over cash, valuables or even property. They may bully, scare or flatter their victims. They may make contact in person or by mail, by phone or online. The criminals are long gone with the goods by the time the scam is spotted. Some common rip-offs to watch out for include:

- ➔ False promises of winnings. Targets are told they've won something but must provide a security deposit or personal information—a Social Security, bank account or credit card number—to collect. Another approach is to invite targets to invest in a concocted "sure-fire, money-making" deal.
- ➔ Donations to phony charities.



- ➔ Home or car repairs. Scammers do shoddy work or nothing at all to fix a problem that may not even have existed.

To help protect those in your care, remind them that it pays to be on guard when dealing with strangers. It's also OK to say no. Suggest that they always ask for identification so that they can promptly check out the offer with the police. Con artists will be gone in a flash.



Sleep Well, Feel Better

A good night's rest is key to good health.

T rue or False: *Sleep problems are a normal part of aging.*

False. Complaints about sleep are common among older people, but most problems are due to illness, medications and poor sleeping habits—not normal aging.

Elderly people need about the same amount of nightly sleep as when they were younger. Those who get seven to nine hours of sleep nightly are in better general health than those sleeping less. When people don't get enough sleep, it often shows up as:

- Increased irritability and depression.
- Reduced attention span.
- More frequent falls.
- More frequent memory lapses.
- Higher blood pressure.
- Increased risk for obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

These effects can be serious enough to shorten a lifespan. So, if the older

person you're caring for can't sleep, doing nothing is not a healthy option.

Don't try an over-the-counter sleep aid without the advice of a doctor. Older patients often take a variety of medications. Adding one more pill to the mix can cause a harmful drug interaction. A sleeping pill may cause drowsiness, but it won't fix whatever's causing the insomnia.


Sunshine, fresh air and mild exercise may promote sleep, along with avoiding daytime naps longer than 20 minutes.

How to Sleep Better

Most older people with sleep problems have sleep habits that don't promote shut-eye. Here's a list of sleep tips to put into practice. If they don't help, notify the doctor.

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, avoiding daytime naps.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Don't use the bed for activities other than sleep or intimacy.

- Keep the bedroom dark, quiet and a little cool.
- Follow relaxation rituals before bedtime, such as a warm bath or foot rub.
- Shut out worries. Don't replay the stresses of the day.
- If falling asleep is difficult, leave the bedroom and engage in a quiet activity until sleep appeals.

 In a Mayo Clinic study, nearly **60 PERCENT** of people ages **70 TO 89** REPORTED A SLEEP DISORDER OTHER THAN INSOMNIA. Sleep-related leg cramps were most common.



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