

# Tobacco use and oral health



We'll do whatever it takes and then some.

## The Mouth-Body Connection

Smokers are about twice as likely to lose their teeth as non-smokers, according to a 30-year study at Tufts University that investigated the relationship between smoking and tooth loss. Another study cited in the *Journal of Dental Research* shows that cigarette smokers are nearly twice as likely as non-smokers to need root canal treatment.

While most people are aware of the impact tobacco use has on their overall health, some might not consider its effects on oral health, including:

- Increased risk of mouth pain, cavities and gum recession (which can lead to tooth loss)
- Reduced ability to fight infection, including in the mouth and gums
- Slower healing of gum tissue after oral surgery or from injury
- Increased risk of tooth loss (twice that of non-smokers)
- Increased risk of needing root canal treatment (twice that of non-smokers)
- Increased risk of gum (periodontal) disease (50 percent more cases than non-smokers)
- Reduced effectiveness of gum disease treatments

### What about smokeless tobacco?

It's not just smoking tobacco that has negative effects on your oral health. Use of smokeless tobacco (snuff or chewing tobacco) causes bad breath, discolors teeth and promotes tooth

decay that leads to tooth loss. Other effects include:

- Decreased sense of smell and taste
- Greater risk than non-users of developing cavities
- 50 percent greater risk of developing cancers of the cheek, gums and lining of the lips

In addition, cigars, chewing tobacco, snuff and unprocessed tobacco leaves (used as cigar wrappers) contain tiny particles that are abrasive to teeth. When mixed with saliva and chewed, an abrasive paste is created that wears down teeth over time.

### Tobacco use among children and teens

All parents, even those who do not use tobacco, should educate themselves and their children about the dangers of smoking:

- Approximately 3,000 children and teens become regular users each

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day (including chewing tobacco).

- Nearly one-quarter of all high school students smoke.
- Some tobacco companies target children with cherry-flavored chewing tobacco sold in colorful containers and sweet-smelling candy-flavored cigarettes packaged in shiny tins.
- Children exposed to tobacco smoke may have delays in the formation of their permanent teeth.
- Women who smoke may be more likely to have children born with an oral cleft (cleft lip or cleft palate).

### Kicking the habit

If you are a smoker or a parent with a child or teen who you suspect may be using tobacco, you can start by understanding that tobacco dependence is a nicotine addiction disorder.

There are four aspects to nicotine addiction: physical, sensory, psychological and behavioral. All aspects of nicotine addiction need to be addressed in order to break the habit. This difficulty can mean that tobacco users may need to try several times before they are able to successfully kick the habit.

The good news is that the risk of tooth loss decreases after you quit smoking. To help you kick the habit, your dentist or physician may prescribe a variety of nicotine replacement therapies, such as a transdermal nicotine patch (worn for 24 hours over several weeks with a dissipating flow of nicotine) or chewing gum (which is slowly chewed every one to two hours and then discarded).

*Some information courtesy of The Academy of General Dentistry*

