

# Health Bulletin

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE

#99 in a series of Health Bulletins on issues of pressing interest to all New Yorkers



## Keep Your Mouth Healthy

Simple steps to protect your teeth and gums

## Take care of your teeth and gums

- Keeping your mouth healthy (oral health) is an important part of keeping your whole body healthy.
- Untreated dental disease can lead to pain, infection, loss of teeth and trouble eating and speaking.
- You can prevent many oral health problems by taking simple steps.

### Gum disease and tooth decay are common oral health problems

Smoking and lack of regular brushing and flossing can cause gum disease.



## What is gum disease?

- Gum disease is an infection of the gums that makes them swell and turn red. It can lead to tooth loss and other health problems.
- **Risk factors** for gum disease include not brushing or flossing regularly, using tobacco and/or having diabetes.

### What are signs of gum disease?

- Red, swollen or tender gums
- Bleeding when brushing, flossing or eating
- Pain when chewing and sensitivity to cold
- Loose teeth or gums that have pulled away from the teeth
- Bad breath or a bad taste that won't go away

## What is tooth decay?

- Tooth decay is damage from bacteria eating away at the teeth. Over time, holes in the teeth called **cavities** can form.
- **Risk factors** for tooth decay include not brushing or flossing regularly, consuming foods or drinks high in sugar or starch and/or eating many snacks during the day.

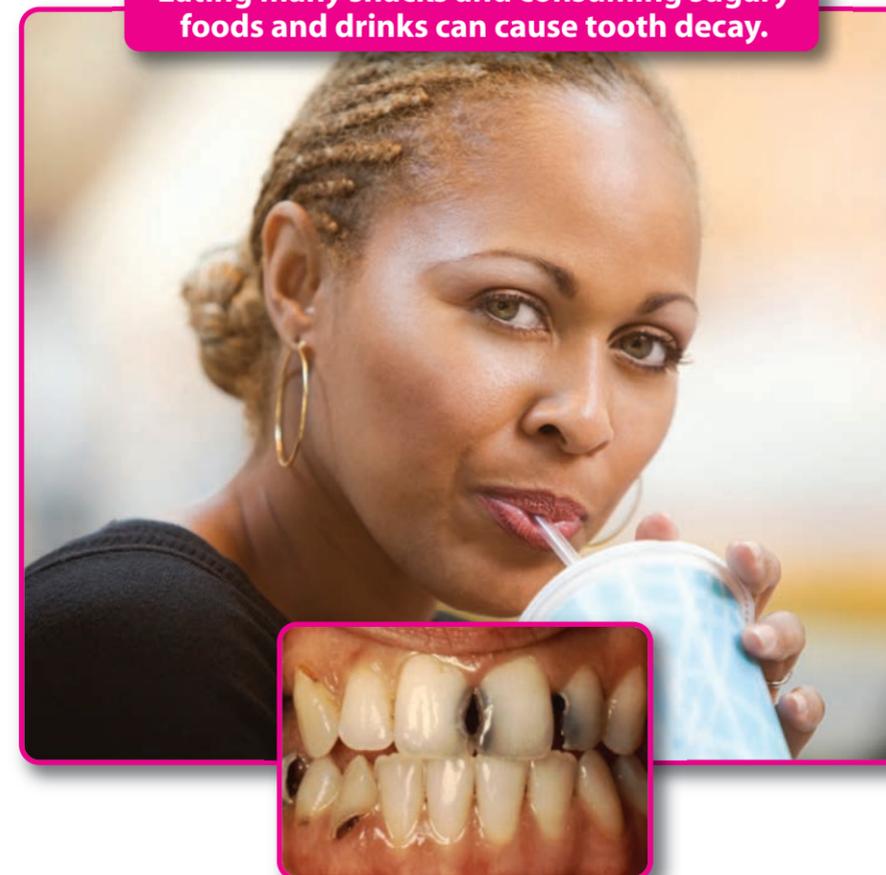
### What are signs of tooth decay?

- Tooth discoloration
- Toothache
- Pain when biting or chewing, or when eating or drinking something sweet, hot or cold
- Cracked or broken teeth

### More Information

- Dental care is covered by Medicaid and Child Health Plus. For more information on enrolling in public health insurance, or to find a low-cost dental provider, call **311** or visit [nyc.gov](http://nyc.gov) and search **teeth**.

Eating many snacks and consuming sugary foods and drinks can cause tooth decay.



## You can prevent oral health problems with simple steps

- **Brush at least twice a day, including before bedtime.** Use toothpaste with fluoride and a soft-bristled toothbrush. Use mouthwash if recommended by your dentist.
- **Floss every day.** The spaces between your teeth or under your gums can't be reached with a toothbrush.
- **Eat healthy.** Limit daytime snacking and snacks high in sugar or starch, such as sodas, cookies or candy.
- **Drink tap water.** The fluoride in New York City's tap water helps keep your teeth strong.
- **Avoid tobacco.** Tobacco greatly increases your risk of gum disease and mouth and throat cancer. Call 311 or visit [nyc.gov/nycquits](http://nyc.gov/nycquits) for help quitting.
- **Limit alcohol.** Drinking a lot of alcohol increases your risk of mouth and throat problems, including cancer. Call 311 or 1-800-LifeNet (1-800-543-3638) if you need help cutting back.
- **Know your risk.** Your habits, diabetes, age and family history can all increase your risk of oral diseases. Talk to your dentist about possible risks and any special care you may need.
- **Visit your dentist.** Regular dental visits (at least once a year) help find problems early, when they are easier to treat.



## Oral Health Tips

### Pregnant women

- Hormonal changes during pregnancy can cause swelling of the gums that can lead to or make gum disease worse. Pay special attention to your teeth and gums during this time.
- Dental treatment, including x-rays and local anesthesia, is safe during pregnancy.
- Cavity-causing germs in your mouth can be passed to your newborn baby through saliva. Treat your tooth decay before your baby is born.

### Parents and caregivers

- Start brushing with a soft toothbrush as soon as your child's first tooth comes in.
- Use fluoride toothpaste. The American Dental Association recommends using a smear the size of a grain of rice for children under 3 years old and a pea-size amount for children 3 to 6 years old.
- Begin regular dental visits no later than age 1.
- Ask your child's dentist or doctor about fluoride varnish and dental sealants, treatments that make teeth stronger and help stop cavities.

### Older adults

- Adults 65 and older are at higher risk for diseases of the mouth, including infections, tooth loss and oral cancer.
- Gums that have pulled away from the teeth are common in older adults. The exposed teeth can decay easily, so it is important to keep them clean.
- Dry mouth, often caused by certain medicines or health conditions, can lead to tooth decay or trouble eating. Drink water often, and brush with fluoridated toothpaste.
- If you have dentures, remove and clean them after eating and before going to sleep.

**DIAL  
311**

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**New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**  
Gotham Center, 42-09 28th Street  
L.I.C., New York 11101-4134

Bill de Blasio, Mayor  
Mary T. Bassett, MD, MPH, Commissioner

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Gum Disease Inset:  
Ira B. Lamster DDS, MMSc,  
Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health



**Keep Your Mouth Healthy**  
Simple steps to protect your  
teeth and gums

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