

Cannabis & Oral Health



Cannabis and tobacco both cause serious oral health problems because cannabis and tobacco both have a drying effect on saliva production. This drying effect can continue through the withdrawal stage.

Dry mouth is a major cause of dental decay and gum disease. Even the smallest change in the level of saliva can lead to bad breath, soreness or burning in the mouth, and difficulty in chewing, swallowing and speaking.

Saliva is the mouth's own cleaning system – it dilutes and washes away food particles and acids that cause erosion. If you often have a dry mouth, erosion may damage your teeth more quickly. Erosion occurs when enamel is dissolved from tooth surfaces, and teeth may appear shorter and have visibly worn surfacesⁱ which may cause sensitivity.

These hints aim to minimise some of the harm cannabis and tobacco can cause to teeth, gums and other soft tissues in your mouth. Soft tissues include lips, tongue, gums, cheeks and the roof of your mouth.

HEALTHY HINTS

Reduce Dry Mouth (Xerostomia)

Sip tap water frequently to keep your mouth moist. Tap water contains fluoride to strengthen teeth. Carry a water bottle with you whenever practical and keep it next to your bed at night to sip.

Reduce Tooth Decay

Brush with a fluoride toothpaste morning and night and floss daily. The best toothbrush is one with a small head and soft bristles. Electric toothbrushes can also be very good. Brushing and flossing cleans away plaque that causes tooth decay.

Reduce Gum Disease

Brush teeth and gums gently. Floss between teeth daily – giving special attention to the areas that look red and puffy or bleed – this can reverse the early signs of gum disease.ⁱⁱ

Smokers have higher levels of gum disease, caused by poor / impaired blood circulation in the tissues around the teethⁱⁱⁱ.

Reducing the risk of oral cancer

Have regular dental checkups to monitor the soft tissues in your mouth.

Cannabis smoke acts as a cancer-causing agent and is associated with changes and lesions within the oral soft tissues. Chronic smokers of cannabis have an increased risk of developing oral cancer and other oral infections.^{iv}

Avoid sharing bongs, pipes, joints and cigarettes

Bacteria and viruses such as cold sores, respiratory infections, gastro infections causing diarrhoea and vomiting, and meningococcal disease can all be spread from person to person by saliva.

Healthy Munchies

Eat healthy munchies such as fruit, nuts, vegetables and dairy products, including milk, cheese and yoghurt in between meals.

Soft drinks, sports drinks, chocolate, jams, lollies, and other sugar and acid laden snacks cause tooth decay. Reducing your sugar and acid intake will help to minimise the risk of decay.

Chew sugarless gum

Sugarless gum promotes saliva flow for a dry mouth, reducing decay. Saliva constantly washes away acid and puts minerals back into teeth.

Sensitivity

Special toothpastes and gels are available in supermarkets and pharmacies to help reduce sensitive teeth. Tooth sensitivity has a number of causes. Teeth can become sensitive when enamel is lost or when root surfaces of teeth are exposed. Consult a Dentist first to find out why you have sensitivity.

Smoke outside

Smokers are encouraged to smoke outside the car and home. Research shows that exposure to passive smoking can harm the health of children and others.

Visit a Dentist

Look under dentist in the yellow pages for a private dentist. Health care card holders can contact their local area Dental Health Service. Health care card holders who live in South East Sydney Illawarra Area Health Service, and who have drug or alcohol problems, may be eligible to access the Special Needs Dental Service at the Mission Australia Centre, Surry Hills. For further information on eligibility contact the Mission Australia Centre on 9360 0877.

Keep Your Smile

ⁱ University of Adelaide. Colgate Dental Education Programs. (2006). *Erosion*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Dental Practice Education Research Unit

ⁱⁱ Colgate®. *Oral Health for teens and 20s* (2006). Robert Burtons Printers

ⁱⁱⁱ University of Adelaide. Colgate Dental Education Program. *Dental Care for people with Diabetes*. (2007) University of Adelaide Dental Practice Education Research Unit.

^{iv} Cho, C.M., Hirsch, R., & Johnstone, S. (2005,50) General and Oral Health Implications Of Cannabis Use. *Australian Dental Journal*, 70-74.