

# HIV AND ORAL HEALTH

*Taking care of the mouth and teeth is a very important, yet often overlooked, part of maintaining general health. Oral health refers to the condition of teeth, gums, mouth, tongue, and throat.*

*Oral health can significantly affect physical and emotional wellbeing, including comfort, appearance, self-image, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, diet, and speech, and can further impact upon other health conditions and the body's ability to fight HIV.*

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE A HEALTHY MOUTH?

People living with HIV (PLHIV) may experience a number of changes to their oral health.

Some of the common changes include taste changes which can occur as a common side effect from some HIV treatments and other medications. These can also be caused by: gum infections, abscesses, or certain fungal infections.

### Encourage the person to:

- rinse the mouth clean with a neutral tasting alcohol-free mouthwash (before eating may be useful). This kills bacteria responsible for bad breath, reduces plaque, and helps prevent gum disease
- thoroughly brush teeth, at least twice a day or after meals; use toothpaste or rinses that contain fluoride
- floss after meals
- drink plenty of water (2-3 litres a day) and stimulate saliva by chewing sugar free gum between meals to avoid a dry mouth

- visit the dentist regularly (at least every 6 months)
- where dentures or other dental prosthetics are fitted (crowns, bridges, braces), correct cleaning and maintenance is also important. Dentures that are poorly fitted can also negatively impact upon oral health, comfort and nutrition
- find a dentist who has experience of HIV and whom the person living with HIV can feel comfortable
- regularly inspect the inside of their mouth for signs of infection or sores.

## CHOOSING A DENTIST

All people have the right to fair and adequate treatment provided in a caring, non-discriminatory manner. There is no legal requirement for people with HIV to disclose their status to any health care worker, including dentists. All workers should be trained in **standard precautions**, which reduce the risk of getting or passing on HIV and other illnesses (see *Factsheet 2: Prevention and Standard Precautions* for more information).

Though there isn't a requirement to disclose, it may be helpful for PLHIV to choose a dentist who is familiar with HIV and its effects on oral health, or one who has worked with PLHIV in the past. Recommendations can be provided by HIV specialists, organisations like Living Positive Victoria, or by asking other people with HIV. It may also be useful to contact a potential dentist and ask about their familiarity and experience with HIV.

## COMMON DENTAL ISSUES FOR PLHIV

### Dry mouth (Xerostomia)

- Dry mouth occurs because of a lack of saliva. It is a fairly common side effect of HIV medications and other prescriptions drugs like antidepressants. In some cases it may be caused by HIV infection itself. Without enough saliva, more serious problems can arise, like tooth decay, gum disease, or candidiasis. Drinking plenty of fluids can reduce dry mouth. If necessary, there are various products available from dentists that can treat dry mouth.

### Teeth clenching and grinding (Bruxism)

- Clenching and grinding teeth can wear down teeth and cause them physical damage. These are caused mostly by emotional and physical factors, not by HIV itself. Some medications can affect sleep and mood, which can in turn affect teeth grinding. Relaxing well before bedtime can help reduce the frequency and intensity of teeth. If it is caused by physical factors, a dentist can recommend dental guards to prevent it.

### Tooth discolouration

- Discolouration is when a tooth or several teeth darken noticeably compared to normal colour. This can be caused by smoking, drug use, or poor dental hygiene. Sometimes making lifestyle changes can reverse discolouration; in other cases, it may be necessary to have a trained dental professional conduct a procedure to whiten the teeth to their natural colour. It is not recommended to use over-the-counter bleaching products, as they can damage the teeth and cause other dental problems.

### Taste changes

- Changes in how things taste may be brought on by some antiretroviral therapy (ART) drugs or other medications. They may also be caused by oral problems like gum infections, abscesses, or fungal infections. Using an alcohol-free rinse can alleviate this issue, as can brushing twice a day and flossing after meals. Limiting highly

acidic foods (like alcoholic beverages and citrus), as well as foods containing refined sugar, can help lessen the intensity of these changes. It is helpful to discuss any taste changes with a dentist in order to determine the cause.

### Gingivitis and Periodontitis

- Gingivitis and periodontitis are gum infections characterised by swollen or bleeding gums, especially when brushing or flossing. Usually these are caused by poor oral hygiene, but can also be caused by poor nutrition and smoking. If there are signs of periodontitis or gingivitis, switching to a soft bristle toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste can help heal the gums. Once they are healed, flossing regularly and using alcohol-free mouthwashes with chlorhexidine can prevent infection from returning.

### Oral ulcers

- Ulcers appear as inflamed, red, and painful open sores. They make eating and drinking extremely uncomfortable. In people with HIV, they usually occur in people who are just starting on treatment, while their immune system rebuilds itself. Occasionally they can be a sign of weakened immune system, a side effect of certain ART, or a symptom of other viruses. If you notice oral ulcers, it is important to see a doctor or dentist as soon as possible to ensure they do not worsen.

### Oral candidiasis (Thrush)

- Thrush is a fungal infection that appears as white patches in the mouth and on the tongue. Usually it is a sign of a weakened immune system, as healthy immune systems can easily fight it off. It is important to contact a doctor or health professional in order to address the underlying problem. The doctor can also recommend the best treatment for thrush and discuss nutritional strategies for helping to prevent it.