

Going to the Dentist

Your oral health affects your overall health. If your teeth and gums aren't healthy, you can't chew and swallow the right foods. Also, some conditions of the teeth and gums, left untreated, can become systemic infections that can cause serious damage. Regular dental visits, in addition to good oral care at home, are essential to maintaining healthy teeth and gums.

Going to the Dentist Regularly

In addition to brushing and flossing daily at home, everyone needs to see a dentist at least once every six months. At every dental visit, your dentist and/or dental hygienist will examine and clean your teeth, check your gums for signs of inflammation, and examine your mouth for possible signs of cancer. You need a regular dental cleaning by a professional (dentist or dental hygienist) to remove plaque and tartar from your teeth.

- **Plaque** is a sticky film that forms on your teeth. Plaque contains bacteria that can cause your gums to turn red, swell, and bleed (this is called gingivitis). Plaque can also attack your tooth enamel and cause cavities.
- **Tartar** is a rough deposit that is formed from plaque and minerals in your saliva. Tartar (also called calculus) can't be removed with a toothbrush and dental floss, and must be removed by your dentist during a regular cleaning. Removal of tartar is essential to keeping your gums and teeth healthy.

Bacterial Infections

Some of the most common oral problems among people living with HIV are bacterial infections such as gingivitis (inflammation of the gums) and periodontal disease (pain, bleeding and rapid destruction of gum tissue and bone). By having a regular dental check-up, in addition to regular brushing and flossing at home, you can prevent these diseases and enjoy better health.

HIV and Professional Oral Health Care

Regular visits to the dentist help to identify infections and conditions early and treat them before they become problematic. This may be particularly important for persons with decreased immune function, such as persons living with HIV. Studies show that cavities in people living with HIV may act as reservoirs for fungus. Treating cavities in a timely manner may help to decrease infections like thrush. Also, your dental professional can check for oral signs of HIV-related illnesses to monitor the progression of HIV disease.

You and Your Dentist are Partners in Good Oral Health

For more information about going to the dentist as well as dental assistance programs and how to find a local dentist near you, contact the American Dental Association (www.ada.org). For more information about dental care for persons living with HIV, try the following websites:

HIVdent.org (www.HIVdent.org)

The Body: An AIDS and HIV Information Resource (www.thebody.com)