

Stressed out? Relax to improve your oral health

Are you feeling stressed out these days? Not only can stress cause headaches, stomachaches, and anxiety, it also can cause numerous dental problems.

Some signs of stress are irritability, restlessness, worrying, tension in the neck and shoulders and depression. Other things you might notice are low motivation, difficulty sleeping, crying and changes in eating or drinking. Maintaining a healthy stress level can help to avoid:

Gum Disease—Gum disease is caused by the bacteria in plaque, but stress can contribute.¹ Stress can weaken the immune system, which makes it easier for gum disease to take hold. Stressed people also are reported to neglect their oral hygiene, which is the main cause of gum disease.² Signs include red, swollen, sore and bleeding gums.

Cavities—When we're stressed, we tend to eat unhealthy foods, such as candy and cookies.¹ The high sugar levels in these foods feed the acid-producing bacteria in the mouth, and these acids eat away at the teeth to create cavities. Cavities can lead to toothaches, tooth loss or serious infections.

Canker Sores—Emotional stress can trigger canker sores, which can form on any of the oral soft tissues, including the insides of the cheeks, the gums and even under the tongue. These painful sores can make it hard to eat or drink.

Oral Cancer—Stress can sometimes cause us to choose unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as smoking and drinking alcohol, which are the biggest risk factors for oral cancer. Sores that don't heal, lumps on the oral tissues or even a sore throat can be signs of oral cancer.³

Bruxism—Grinding your teeth and clenching your jaw at night (bruxism) are signs of stress that can loosen the teeth and damage the enamel, which can require serious dental work. Your dentist may recommend a night guard to cushion tooth-to-tooth contact. You can buy these online or at a drugstore.



Tips to manage your stress

- Take breaks throughout the day
- Find ways to relax, like yoga or meditation
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Limit alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco use
- Exercise regularly
- Develop a routine
- Get enough sleep
- Write down your goals and priorities
- Talk to a counselor

1. American Psychological Association. Stress a Major Health Problem in the U.S., Warns APA, apa.org, 2007.

2. National Institutes of Health, Stress and Periodontal Disease: The Link and Logic, nih.gov, 2013.

3. American Cancer Society, Risk Factors for Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancers cancer.org.