

How Tobacco Use Can Affect Oral Health

“All types of tobacco products cause problems to oral and dental health”



Oral Health in Massachusetts: A Fact Sheet

Tobacco use affects nearly every organ of the body, causing many diseases and harming the health of smokers, and non-smokers via second-hand smoke.¹ More deaths are caused each year by tobacco use than by all deaths from motor vehicle injuries, suicides, murders, HIV and alcohol use combined.² Smoking leads to a greater chance of developing not only oral/dental diseases like oral cancer and periodontitis (serious gum disease), but also many other chronic conditions. Tobacco use also causes many unpleasant side effects, such as bad breath, stained teeth, and a decreased sense of taste.

Are all types of tobacco dangerous to your oral health?

Tobacco contains over 7,000 chemicals¹ including nicotine which have addictive properties. Because of these harmful chemicals in tobacco, **all types of tobacco can cause problems to oral/dental health.** Cigarette smoking, as well as cigar or pipe smoking, increases the risk for many types of oral cancer. Smoking pipes can also cause tooth and soft tissue abrasions due to the constant rubbing or scraping against the tooth and tissues.³ Smokeless or chewing tobacco is no exception to oral cancer and is not a safe alternative to cigarettes. Addiction to nicotine through smokeless tobacco happens just like cigarettes and other products made of tobacco.

- Tobacco smoke damages every organ in the body and causes disease and death.
- There is no risk-free level of exposure to tobacco smoke, and there is no safe tobacco product.
- Yearly, hundreds of thousands of children suffer from respiratory infections because of exposure to secondhand smoke.

Oral Cancer

Oral cancer includes cancer of the lips, tongue, mouth, and pharynx (throat). Even though oral cancer is a lesser known cancer to the public; according to the American Cancer Society, in the year 2010 alone, about 26,000 new cases of oral cancer were diagnosed in the U.S. and about 6,000 people are estimated to die from it. Although there are several risk factors for oral cancer including smoking, alcohol use, prolonged sunlight exposure and the human papillomavirus (HPV), smoking dramatically increases the risk. 75% of individuals 50 years and older who are diagnosed with oral cancer are tobacco users.⁴



ORAL CANCER ON THE TONGUE

Leukoplakia

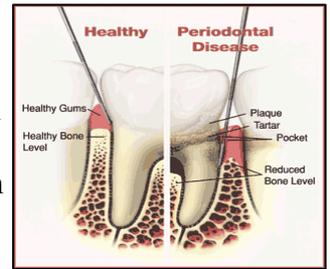
Leukoplakia is a condition where white patches form on the soft tissues of the mouth; and can not be removed. Its cause is unknown, but smoking is believed to trigger leukoplakia. Of the different types of tobacco, chewing tobacco and snuff play a key role in causing leukoplakia. As many as three out of four regular users of “smokeless tobacco” products eventually develop leukoplakia where they hold the tobacco against their cheek(s).⁵ In most cases, leukoplakia is non-cancerous, but it can be dangerous and may lead to cancer in a small percentage of individuals. It’s also important to note that many oral cancers appear next to areas of leukoplakia.



WHITE PATCHES ON THE GUM AND CHEEK AREAS

Periodontal Disease (Periodontitis)

Smoking is one of the most significant risk factors associated with the development of periodontal disease.⁶ Periodontal disease may range from mild gum inflammation to a serious disease where there is permanent damage to the soft tissues and bone that supports the teeth. Periodontitis is serious because it may ultimately lead to tooth loss. Smoking also affects the healing process after periodontal treatment, because of the harmful effects of tobacco. The deadly chemicals in tobacco prevent the body from proper healing, and delaying the regeneration of periodontal tissues. It is very important for an individual who smokes to have a regular dental exam so that any signs of periodontal disease can be detected and treated early.



Oral Cancer Screening

Early detection of oral cancer is critical for positive prognosis; therefore receiving an annual oral cancer screening is key in the prevention of oral cancer. An oral cancer screening consists of a visual examination of all the soft tissues of the mouth, including the tongue and its base, as well as a tactile examination of the floor of the mouth, tongue and the lymph nodes surrounding the mouth and in the neck. Dental professionals are trained to detect any abnormalities in these areas; therefore, it is important that **everyone with or without teeth receive an annual oral cancer screening by a qualified dental or health care provider.**

How to Quit

Quitting tobacco use is difficult for many, but has profound benefits for the user and everyone around them. Nicotine substitutes, such as nicotine gums and patches can be easily found in drug stores. Also, there are quit lines and programs that can help the user. For resources and support, including free quit coaching, quit plans, or educational materials, call **1-800-QUIT-NOW**. Other helpful web resources to guide the quitting process include:

- <http://www.smokefree.gov>
- <http://www.askadviserrefer.org>

References

- ¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *A Report of the Surgeon General: How Tobacco Smoke Causes Disease: The Biology and Behavioral Basis for Smoking-Attributable Disease*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2010.
- ² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Health Consequences of Smoking: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2004.
- ³ Mirbod, Sayed M., and Stephen I. Ahing. "Tobacco-Associated Lesions of the Oral Cavity: Part I. Nonmalignant Lesions." *J Can Dent Assoc* 66 (2000): 252-6. Print.
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- ⁵ "Leukoplakia: Causes - MayoClinic.com." *Mayo Clinic medical information and tools for healthy living - MayoClinic.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 July 2010. <<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/leukoplakia/DS00458/DSECTION=causes>>.
- ⁶ "Periodontal (Gum) Disease: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatments." *NIDCR Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 July 2010. <<http://www.nidcr.nih.gov/OralHealth/Topics/GumDiseases/PeriodontalGumDisease.htm>>.

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