

Dental Care Coordination Informational Guide
*For use with Minnesota Senior Care Plus (MSC+) and
PrimeWest Senior Health Complete (HMO SNP) members*

Unique Dental Needs of Members age 65 and over

- This may be a medically complex group. Members may suffer from chronic health conditions such as diabetes, asthma, arthritis, elevated cholesterol, seizures, depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorder (SUD). Many of the medications used to treat these conditions are known to have complications that cause increased dental decay and pain.
- Dental pain is known to amplify behavioral health conditions.
- Disabilities may include anomalies to the oral cavity. For example, teeth may be pitted and more prone to decay due to improper formation of the enamel.
- Medical complexity increases the risk for poor oral health, which can lead to other health issues. Inflammation of the gums associated with gum disease can lead to inflammation in the blood vessels and cause systemic diseases such as heart disease and stroke. When the gum layer is disturbed, bacteria present in the mouth can enter the bloodstream and cause inflammation throughout the body (WebMD). Recent research shows a link between the body's inflammatory response and declined cognitive function, including dementia (University of Southampton). Inhaling bacteria present in the mouth can lead to pneumonia.
- People with diabetes are generally more susceptible to bacterial infection, such as gum disease, due to decreased ability to fight bacteria that invades the gums.
- Dry mouth (xerostomia) is a possible side effect of over 1,100 medications. These include certain antianxiety, antidepressant, antipsychotic, and high blood pressure medications; muscle relaxants; smoking cessation agents; and decongestants (AAOM). Other causes of dry mouth include chronic health conditions and radiation treatment to the head and neck. Dry mouth is not only extremely uncomfortable, affecting the sense of taste and ability to talk, but the lack of saliva, which contains antimicrobial components and minerals that help rebuild tooth enamel, also greatly increases the risk and severity of tooth decay. Frequent checkups and enhanced prevention are especially important for those suffering from this condition.

Considerations When Scheduling Dental Appointments

- Annual dental visits are important for all members, including those who have no teeth or who wear dentures. Having a dentist perform an oral cancer exam by checking the gums and soft tissue is extremely important. Around 51,540 new cases of oral cancer are diagnosed nationwide each year (ACS). The earlier it is caught, the better the prognosis. For members with dentures, the stability and comfort of dentures rely on the foundation that supports them. Dentures should be checked for wear and fit so that adjustments can be made as necessary.
- Members with heart defects have an increased risk of bacterial endocarditis. This infection of the inner lining of the heart is caused when bacteria from another part of the body, such as the mouth, spread through the bloodstream and attach to damaged areas of the heart, leading to more damage and sometimes fatal complications. Check with the dentist or medical provider to see if preventive antibiotics are indicated before dental treatment.
- Assist members/remind members to provide a list of all their medications to the dentist when they go to their dental appointment. They also should be prepared to provide pertinent medical history information.
- Extra time may be required to complete dental treatment. Encourage members to discuss any special needs or special accommodations they may require at the time the appointment is being scheduled.

Sources: American Academy of Oral Medicine (AAOM), "Xerostomia," updated October 15, 2015, www.aaom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=107:xerostomia&catid=322:patient-condition-information&Itemid=3120; American Cancer Society (ACS), "Key Statistics for Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancers," accessed July 20, 2018, www.cancer.org/cancer/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer/about/key-statistics.html; University of Southampton, "Link between Gum Disease and Cognitive Decline in Alzheimer's," ScienceDaily, March 10, 2016, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/03/160310141330.htm.