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FROM HEAD TO TOE

Smoking and Your Oral Health

The Hard Truth About Smoking

Tobacco is Ontario's number one preventable public health problem, and the leading cause of premature death in the province, killing more than 13,500 people each year. This is almost five times the number of deaths caused by traffic accidents, suicides and AIDS combined.

Cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke attacks living tissues wherever it travels – mouth, tongue, throat, esophagus, air passages, lungs, stomach. Eventually, nicotine and tobacco by-products reach the bladder, pancreas and kidneys. Smokers therefore have a higher risk of developing many life-threatening health conditions including heart disease, chronic lung disease, stroke, and cancers of the lung, mouth, throat, esophagus, bladder and pancreas.

The Effects of Smoking on Oral Health

As prevention professionals, dental hygienists are concerned about the effects of smoking on both oral (dental) and overall health.

As part of your assessment, your oral health professional will ask you a series of lifestyle-related questions, including whether you are a smoker, and if so, how long you have been smoking. Dental hygienists are trained to advise you on the hazards of tobacco use, to show you the effects of smoking on the mouth, and to encourage and support your decision to stop smoking.

While the effects of smoking on your lungs, heart and other organs are not visible to the naked eye, your dental hygienist can easily see the evidence in your mouth.

Smokers can expect to develop some combination of the following, depending on the amount and length of time they have smoked:

- Persistent bad breath
- Discoloured teeth
- An increase in calculus (tartar) build-up
- Periodontal (gum and bone) disease that may progress more quickly and be more severe than in non-smokers
- Jaw bone loss
- Shifting teeth
- An increased number of missing teeth
- Oral cancers
- Mouth sores
- Root caries (cavities)
- Sinusitis
- Hairy tongue
- Smoker's lip (like a burn)
- Altered sense of taste and smell
- Delayed wound healing

Gum Disease

Smoking has been established as a significant risk factor for gum disease. Tobacco reduces blood flow to the gums, depriving them of oxygen and nutrients that allow gums to stay healthy, and leaving them vulnerable to bacterial infection.

According to one U.S. study, cigarette smoking may play a major role in more than half the cases of severe gum disease in adults. Current smokers were about four times more likely to have periodontitis than people who had never smoked.

If unchecked, periodontal disease can lead to complete destruction of the tooth's supporting tissues, abscesses and, ultimately, loss of the tooth.

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Oral Cancers

Of the many effects to teeth and gums of smoking cigarettes, oral cancer is of course the most serious.

The death rate from oral cancers (which includes cancers of the tongue, mouth, gums, tonsils and pharynx) exceeds the death rate from cervical cancer.

Getting Started at Quitting

When you're ready to quit, your oral health professional is ready to support and assist you. There are many resources available to you through your oral health team to help you make this important transition.

Here are some tips to help get you started at quitting:

- Begin by figuring out why and when you smoke. That's the first step to quitting for good.
- In order to succeed, you must convince yourself that you really want to stop smoking.

The Four D's*

1. **Drink Water** – Water with crushed ice helps flush nicotine out of your system faster and helps satisfy oral cravings.
2. **Deep Breathing** – Take a “deep breath break” instead of a cigarette break – Take 10 deep breaths and hold the last one while lighting a match. Exhale slowly, and blow out the match.
3. **Delay** – Each day, delay lighting your first cigarette by one hour. When you have your next craving, delay for another 15 or 30 minutes. Now YOU will be in control!
4. **Do Something Different** – When you have a craving, change your activity. Get out of the situation that makes you want to smoke.

**Adapted from “Tips To Help You Quit” – The Lung Association*

- There are two ways to quit smoking: going ‘cold turkey’; and tapering off slowly. Whichever way you choose, pick a memorable date to quit, preferably during a time of low stress.
- Get plenty of exercise.
- If you have been a heavy smoker, the use of nicotine patches or gum may be advisable. Contact your physician for further information.
- Don't be discouraged! On average it takes about five attempts to successfully stop smoking. Each relapse brings you one step closer to quitting for good.

The Benefits of Quitting

Men and women of all ages experience major and immediate health benefits when they quit smoking. Ex-smokers have a decreased risk of heart disease, respiratory illnesses, strokes and many cancers. In fact, after 15 years, an ex-smoker's risk of death is similar to that of a person who has never smoked.

Quitting will have a significant, positive impact on oral health as well, reducing the rate and incidence of gum disease, oral cancers and bone and tooth loss; keeping teeth whiter; and allowing sores to heal and disappear.

And you will be reducing the risk of passing on harmful second-hand smoke to your loved ones.

For more information:

Your dental hygienist can provide you with more detailed self-help information about smoking cessation. These materials can also be obtained by calling:

The Canadian Cancer Society – Ontario Division:
416-488-5400 or 1 800 268-8874

The Lung Association – Ontario:
1-888-344-LUNG (5864)

Your Dental Hygienist

Your dental hygienist is an important member of the oral health care team. He or she provides professional treatment and advice to help prevent gum disease and dental cavities, as well as to support and promote total wellness.

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In Ontario, all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario (CDHO). The CDHO regulates the profession to make sure the public receives safe and effective dental hygiene care. All practicing dental hygienists have been educated at a post-secondary dental hygiene program.

Watch for this pin, worn by Ontario's registered dental hygienists.



For more information about oral health, contact your dental hygienist.

References: available upon request.

Acknowledgements: Beverley Kassirer-Shniffer, RDH, BScD.

