

Say Ahhhhh!!: Looking at the Lips

Healthy lips are smooth, pink, moist and have no broken skin. **Watch your clients for these signs of lip problems—and report them to your supervisor:**

- Reddened or bluish areas.
- Swollen lips.
- Blisters or sores.
- Bleeding.
- Dry, chapped or rough lips.
- A lump, growth or dry, white patch on the lips.

Help your clients keep their lips healthy by:

- Applying an approved moisturizer and/or sunscreen to their lips to avoid chapping.
- Encouraging them not to lick or “chew” on their lips. (Some people do this as a nervous habit.)
- Warning them if the food you are serving is very hot. It’s easy to burn the lips, especially with hot liquids.



Looking at the Gums

Healthy gums are pink, moist and smooth—although right next to the teeth, normal gums should look a bit like orange peel. **Watch your clients for these signs of gum problems—and report them to your supervisor:**

- Pale or dark red colored gums.
- Dry areas.
- Lesions, blisters or swollen gum areas.
- Bleeding of the gums.
- Pus between the gums and the teeth.

Help your clients keep their gums healthy by:

- Performing proper mouth care, especially flossing—but avoid scrubbing the gums too vigorously.
- Encouraging them to quit smoking and/or chewing tobacco.
- Remembering to clean the gums of clients who have no teeth.



Looking at the Tongue

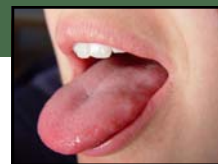
A healthy tongue is pink and moist. **Watch your clients for these signs of tongue problems—and report them to your supervisor:**

- Dryness.
- Reddened patches or blisters on the tongue.
- White patches or a white coating on the tongue.
- A “furry-looking” tongue. (This can be caused by a build-up of food and bacteria.)
- A thick, swollen tongue.

- Pain or swelling under the tongue.

Help your clients keep their tongue healthy by:

- Warning them when the foods or liquids you serve are very hot—so they don’t burn their tongue.
- Remembering to brush the tongue as well as the teeth.



Say Ahhhhh!!: Looking at the Teeth

Healthy teeth look clean, with no visible debris. They often darken or discolor with age. **Watch your clients for these signs of tooth problems and report them to your supervisor:**

- Loose teeth.
- Loose fillings or chips of fillings in the mouth.
- Cracked or chipped teeth.
- Visible holes in the teeth.
- Teeth that have fallen out.

Help your clients keep their teeth healthy by:

- Providing proper mouth care, especially brushing and flossing.
- Encouraging and/or assisting them to brush after each meal.
- Helping them limit sugary snacks between meals.
- Encouraging them to visit a dentist regularly.



Looking at Saliva

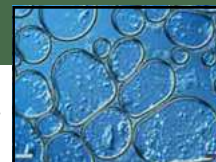
Healthy saliva is thin and watery. There should be enough saliva in the mouth to keep it moist. Saliva helps digest food and makes it easier to swallow food. It also protects teeth from decay by washing food particles away from the teeth and mouth. Elderly people often have reduced saliva flow because of age, disease or the medications they take. **Watch for these signs of saliva problems—and report them to your supervisor:**

- Too much saliva.
- Too little saliva.

- Thickened and/or cloudy saliva.

Help your clients have healthy saliva by:

- Encouraging them to drink plenty of fluids, especially water.
- Reporting signs of a dry mouth to your supervisor. There are some preparations called “artificial saliva” that may benefit your clients.



Some “Mouthy” Definitions

Cavity: A cavity is a hole in the outer surface of the tooth enamel.

Caries: Another name for a cavity.

Gingiva: Another name for the gums. You’ve probably heard of gingivitis, which is the term for “inflammation of the gums”.

Implant: An artificial tooth root that is placed into the jaw to hold a replacement tooth or bridge in place. Dental implants are an alternative to dentures and allow a person to have teeth that look and feel just like the real thing!

Oral Mucosa: This is another name for the skin on the inside of your cheeks and gums.

Sealant: A coating put on teeth (especially molars) to act as a “shield” against cavities.

Plaque: An invisible film that sticks on the teeth. It contains the bacteria that causes cavities.

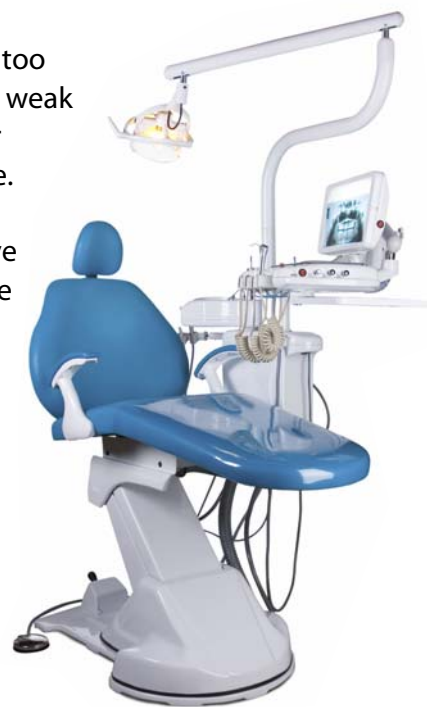
Fluoride: A mineral that helps repair tooth enamel. Fluoride is found in the drinking water of most communities and in many toothpastes and mouthwashes.



Who's At Risk For Mouth Problems?

All your clients need good mouth care, but some are at higher risk for mouth problems. **These include:**

- People who smoke cigarettes, pipes or cigars. Smokers are five times more likely to get gum disease than nonsmokers. They are also at risk for oral cancer.
- Clients with poorly fitting dentures which may cause inflammation or sores.
- Clients who are intubated—with a tube down their throats to give oxygen to the lungs. These clients are at risk for mouth ulcers, bleeding and oral infections. And, having a tube in their mouths makes performing mouth care a real challenge!
- Clients who take medications that have bad effects on the mouth. These include antihistamines, dilantin, certain antibiotics and anticancer chemotherapy.
- Anyone on oxygen. Breathing in oxygen from a tank tends to dry out the tongue and the oral mucosa.
- People with diabetes. They have less circulation to their oral tissues. If they do get a mouth lesion, it will probably be slow to heal. Their breath may also smell “fruity” which is a serious problem. (Report fruity-smelling breath right away!)
- Clients who breathe mostly through their mouths instead of their noses. Mouth breathing tends to reduce the circulation of blood in oral tissues.
- Clients with cancer. Their immune systems are weak and they are prone to mouth infections from chemotherapy and radiation.
- People who have AIDS because they tend to get oral infections and lesions.
- Clients who have an NPO diet order (nothing by mouth). Their mouths get very dry and their lips may get chapped.
- People with renal disease. They may get mouth ulcers, bleeding gums or breath that smells like ammonia.
- Elderly clients, since age often causes reduced saliva production and increased gingivitis (gum irritation).
- Anyone who consumes a lot of sugary foods and/or beverages, including alcohol.
- People who are too confused or too weak to perform their own mouth care.
- People who have poor mouth care habits such as rarely brushing their teeth, flossing or visiting a dentist.



How many of your clients fall into one or more of these categories?

The Elements of Mouth Care: Brushing

The teeth should be brushed at least once a day using a soft toothbrush. It's even better to brush after every meal.

Do and/or help your clients do the following:

- Use a small amount of toothpaste on a soft-bristled toothbrush. Look for toothpaste that contains fluoride.
- Tilt the brush at a 45 degree angle to the teeth—don't brush straight on.
- Beginning at the gum line, sweep the brush from the top of the tooth down to the bottom. Repeat on each tooth five times.
- Make sure you brush the outer, inner and chewing surfaces of *every* tooth.

- Try "dividing" the mouth into four parts—the upper right, the upper left, the lower right and the lower left. Now, count slowly to at least 30 while you brush each section of the mouth. Using this method will help you brush for at least two minutes.
- Don't push too hard with the toothbrush. Remember that it's the end of the bristles that do all the work. If you "scrunch" them down by pushing hard, they won't be able to do their job.

The first toothbrush with bristles was developed in China in 1498. The bristles were hog hairs!



Did you know that apples are known as "nature's toothbrushes"? This is because chewing a nice crisp apple tends to scrub the teeth. (Of course, eating an apple can't really take the place of brushing the teeth!)

Flossing

Flossing once a day helps remove plaque from the spots a toothbrush can't reach.

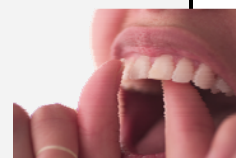
Do and/or help your client do the following:

- Use a piece of floss about 18 inches long. (Most dentists agree that the best floss to use is unwaxed floss.)
- Hold the floss tightly between your fingers—and keep your fingers less than an inch apart.
- Ease the floss between two teeth and slide it all the way down to the gums. (Don't "snap" the floss down hard onto the gums.)
- Now, hold the floss so that it touches the front and back of a tooth at the same time. Slide the floss up and down, so it rubs the entire surface of the tooth. Then, do the same for the next tooth.

- Make sure you get down to the gum line of each tooth—and the *backside* of the last teeth.
- Remember that bleeding is not normal—it means the gums are inflamed. However, regular flossing tends to "toughen up" the gums and make the bleeding stop. Check with your supervisor before you floss a client's teeth if you have noticed bleeding.
- **TIP:** While you are flossing a client's teeth, try telling a story or turning on the TV as a pleasant distraction.

Patient: Please tell me, Dr. Payne, do I have to floss all my teeth?

Dentist: Only the ones you want to keep!



The Elements of Mouth Care: Rinsing

Rinsing the mouth helps get rid of bacteria and little bits of food.

Do and/or help your clients do the following:

- After brushing the teeth, brushing the tongue and flossing, rinse the mouth. You can use water or an over-the counter mouthwash. (If using a mouthwash, look for one that contains fluoride.)
- Remember that some clients may have a prescription mouthwash, especially if they have a problem with mouth sores. Ask your supervisor if you are unsure about using a mouthwash with your clients.
- Remember that *most* mouthwashes are not supposed to be swallowed.

Dentists have different opinions about mouthwashes. Some say that if a mouthwash contains alcohol, it will dry out the mouth. But, others say that if mouthwash doesn't have alcohol in it, it won't kill bacteria. Be sure to read the label on the mouthwash you use. If it says "antibacterial" or "antimicrobial" it will help fight bacteria. If it doesn't, it will probably just cover up "bad breath".



Caring For the Lips

Do and/or help your clients do the following:

- Apply Vaseline or some other topical preparation to help soothe and heal chapped lips.
- Encourage your clients not to lick their lips; this can cause lips to become chapped.
- Try this *home remedy*—but only with your supervisor's approval:

1. Find a plain tea bag. (The tea should be black or green tea).
2. Dampen it with warm water. (Make sure the water is not too hot!)
3. Press the damp tea bag lightly over the lips for 5 minutes. Repeat as needed to help heal chapped lips.



Going to the Dentist

- Encourage your clients to have regular attention from a dentist—even if they wear full dentures.
- While the "standard" dental visit is every six months, some people need to go as often as every three months and others can wait a year or two between visits.
- Besides checking the teeth, dentists assess the health of the tongue, lips, cheeks, throat, jaw bone and saliva glands.
- A dentist can spot mouth problems before they become serious!

