



Dental Problems

Oral health is a big issue for people with HIV. Your mouth lets germs, bacteria and viruses enter your body. This happens when you eat, drink, kiss, breathe or touch your mouth.

Your mouth is the first place where food enters your body. Food you do not swallow can rot your teeth. This may cause infections that spread all over the body.

Mouth, tongue, throat, gum or teeth problems could be a sign that your HIV is not under control. Visits to your dentist help find and treat problems before they get worse.

Other reasons to take care of the mouth, gums and teeth are:

- You can get rid of germs when you brush and floss your teeth.
- Open sores in the mouth allow germs to enter the body.

Signs

Common mouth problems that a person with HIV may get include:

- **Canker sores.** These are shallow sores inside the lips or cheeks. In people with HIV, these may be quite large, heal slowly and appear on the roof of the mouth. The sores can be painful and make it hard to eat.
- **Dry mouth.** Dry mouth or throat is common in people with HIV. This leads to tooth decay and gum disease. These can cause infections.
- **Gum disease.** The major sign is swollen, red, bloody gums. Gum disease causes gaps to open up between the gums and the teeth. This can cause bad breath. People with weak immune systems are at a higher risk for gum disease that can be painful and result in the loss of teeth.

- **Hairy leukoplakia.** This is a white spot on the side of the tongue that looks hairy. It can show up in other parts of the mouth as well. It may look like thrush, but the spots can not be scraped away. It is rarely seen unless the CD4 cell count is low. It is much less common in people who take HIV meds.
- **Herpes simplex 1 infection.** This type of herpes affects the face, lips or mouth. These are sometimes called cold sores or fever blisters. Before a herpes outbreak, a person may feel unwell or have a fever. If someone is already ill, it may be hard to spot. The place where the blisters will appear may itch or tingle. The blisters burst and form a scab. People with HIV may get larger, more painful herpes outbreaks more often.
- **Human papillomavirus infection (HPV).** This virus causes warts. People with HIV can get warts on the mouth, lips and sides of the tongue. These are white, fleshy bumps and can be smooth or rough. Sometimes they look like tiny cauliflower. People with HIV are more likely to get them, and they are harder to treat. One type has been linked to cancers of the mouth and throat if a person also smokes or drinks alcohol.
- **Kaposi's sarcoma.** This happens when blood vessels get tangled into a ball and causes a tumor. This also causes red, purple spots that are often seen first in the roof of the mouth.
- **Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.** This can lead to a soft, bump in the mouth like a tumor.
- **Thrush (oral candidiasis).** This causes white patches on the mouth and throat that leave a raw, red patch when wiped.

Causes

Many things can cause oral health problems. HIV and some HIV meds can cause dry mouth that leads to cavities. You should brush and floss your

teeth often. Visit a dentist on a routine basis. A dentist cleans the teeth and gums more deeply than you can at home. A dentist also checks for and treats problems.

Risk Factors

HIV makes it hard for the body to fight infections. Viruses and bacteria that are not a big deal for others can be a danger to people with HIV.

A dentist can spot infections. You should visit a dentist every six months. A strict routine of when you brush and floss will help fight germs.

Prevention

Keep your teeth, mouth and gums healthy:

- Brush the teeth often with a soft brush and fluoride toothpaste. Brush for two minutes. Brush in tiny circles from one side of the mouth to the other. The back of the teeth and the tongue need special care.
- Floss the teeth once a day or more. This should be done after meals and before you brush. The floss should be pushed gently between the teeth and gums to loosen food. At first, the gums may bleed. This stops where you floss more often.
- Using a fluoride mouthwash twice a day. This helps kill germs that cause cavities and gum disease.
- Visit the dentist at least every six months. This picks up problems before they become severe.
- Do not smoke or use any forms of tobacco. Tobacco use is linked to cancers of the mouth and throat. These are harder to treat than other types of cancers.
- Limit alcoholic drinks. Alcohol is also linked to cancers of the mouth and throat.
- Practice safer oral sex. This helps avoid human papillomavirus infection (HPV) and other STIs.

How to Know You Have Mouth, Teeth and Gum Problems

A doctor or dentist can see most mouth, teeth or gum problems. No special tests are needed.

Treatment

A person with HIV should have mouth, gum or teeth problems treated, no matter what his or her CD4 cell count is.

Some problems linked to HIV can look less severe than they are. Other common issues need special treatment in a person who has HIV. It is best to see a dentist who has treated other people with HIV.

For more information

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call PHP Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

