

Smoking and Smokeless Tobacco

Smoking has been identified as a major risk factor for medical conditions and diseases, including oral cancer. Studies also confirm that smokers are twice as likely to develop periodontal (gum) disease than non-smokers and have a higher than average risk for poor oral health. Tobacco kills more than 40,000 Canadians a year – exceeding the number of deaths from illegal drugs.

Governments and researchers have added smokeless tobacco, like spit tobacco and snuff, as well as marijuana to the list of products that can increase the risk of developing gum disease and oral cancer.

Why people smoke

Based on statistics, there are no real benefits to smoking or chewing tobacco. Some say it is a nervous habit, or it helps to lose weight and relieve stress. Many simply enjoy it, alone or socially. Most young people between the ages of 12 and 15 start smoking or chewing tobacco due to peer pressure. In addition, they believe they are immune to the health risks of smoking or chewing tobacco. They think it is “cool” but don’t realize how addictive it is and how difficult it is to stop.

DANGERS OF SMOKING

Smoking affects almost every part of the body in a negative way. In addition to heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and bronchitis, it causes premature wrinkling, bad breath, hair loss, yellow teeth, slow healing acne, not to mention mouth sores, hairy tongue, smokers lip and oral cancer.

Research shows that secondhand smoke is more dangerous than directly inhaled smoke. It contains three times more tar (affects lungs), five times more carbon monoxide (affects blood) and 10 times more benzene (poison used in insecticides) plus 40 times more ammonia than that used in household cleaners.

In addition...

- Nicotine is addictive
- Cigarettes contain more than 4,000 chemicals and poisons, 50 of which are known to cause cancer
- Smoking stops the natural cleaning and repair system in the lungs
- The longer people smoke the higher the risk of cancer
- Smoking delays healing after surgery
- Smokers have an increased heart rate, shortness of breath, can develop smoker’s cough and age prematurely
- They are also candidates for chronic bronchitis and emphysema
- Tobacco is expensive



For marijuana smokers

Regular pot smoking increases the risk of developing gum disease. Research found that heavy marijuana users, those who indulged once a week, were 1.6 times more likely to have at least mild periodontal disease, compared to those who had never smoked grass. Cannabis contains more than 400 chemical compounds, many of them similar to those found in tobacco.

For smokeless tobacco users

Some people, including a growing number of youth, are meeting their nicotine habit with smokeless tobacco, which is a mixture of tobacco, nicotine, sweeteners (different flavours) abrasives, salts and chemicals. Spit is leafy tobacco sold in pouches. Plug tobacco, sold in brick form, is also a type of “chew.” Snuff is finely ground tobacco sold in small tins. While some people sniff it, the more commonly used form is moist snuff, which is held between the cheek and gum.

THE IMPACT ON ORAL HEALTH

- Halitosis (bad breath)
- Decreased sense of smell and taste
- Stained teeth
- Enamel wear
- Bleeding gums

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- Gum recession and bone loss
- Gum disease that can lead to early tooth loss
- Increased accumulation of plaque and calculus that can cause tooth decay
- Coating on the tongue
- Mouth sores or lesions that do not heal
- Swelling or lumps inside the mouth or throat
- Oral and throat cancer, including lip, tongue, cheek, floor of the mouth
- Nicotine stomatitis, or smoker's palate (white palate with tiny red spots), caused by chronic exposure to the heat from burning tobacco, most common with cigar and pipe smokers
- A precancerous condition, known as leukoplakia, caused by white patches or lesions inside the mouth

TREATMENT AND CARE

Smokers must be extra careful about their oral hygiene. They should brush their teeth twice a day with a fluoridated toothpaste, and brush their tongue and floss daily.

It is important to have regular professional cleanings. Dental hygienists work within their scope of practice to help control gum disease associated with smoking and provide an oral assessment that will often detect oral cancer in the early stages.



HOW TO QUIT

Help is available to those who want to quit smoking and chewing tobacco. Dental hygienists play an important role in counselling clients on the harmful effects of cigarette and smokeless tobacco products. They will work with clients to develop a smoking cessation plan.

There is a vast amount of literature and a number of helplines available to those who want to stop smoking. Prescription drugs, gum, patches and puffers are effective as well as acupuncture and hypnosis.

Helpful resources:

Smoker's helpline – 1.877.513.5333

Talk to a healthcare professional trained in smoking cessation – 1.866.311.5659

Obtain self-help materials – 416.338.7600

Centre for Addiction & Mental Health – www.camh.net

The Stop Smoking Center – www.stopsmokingcenter.net

Games for youth – www.smokingzine.org

Health Canada E-Quit – www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/tobac-tabac/quit-cesser/index-eng.php

The risks and benefits of quitting – www.cancercontrol.cancer.gov/tcrb/smokersrisk

As professional healthcare providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated healthcare professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.

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