

THERE IS NO HEALTH WITHOUT GOOD ORAL HEALTH*

By Carol Van Aernam, RDH, BA

Good oral care and good nutrition are interrelated. You cannot have one without the other. Eating the wrong things can contribute to cavities, gum disease, and other oral health issues. Problems in the mouth can lead to poor nutrition or malnutrition.

Sixty-five percent of older adults residing in nursing homes and 46 percent of older adults residing in community-dwelling homes need treatment for tooth decay and/or periodontal (gum) disease, according to the Center for Oral Health Report.

The Sutter Hospital Study found that oral care is one of the most often missed types of care in the hospital. The study found that implementing staff education and providing oral care 4 times a day for those in the hospital reduced overall non-ventilator hospital acquired pneumonia by 70 percent.

Question: Why is Oral Care so Important?

Answer: Daily brushing and flossing disrupts the bacteria (plaque) in our mouth that causes cavities and gum disease. In many settings we need to provide oral care AT LEAST twice daily for those with teeth or dentures.

Question: What happens if you do not provide daily oral care?

Answer: Plaque irritates the gums causing infection and allows the bacteria to enter the blood stream or lungs which:

- Increases your risk for a heart attack or stroke, or other heart problems.
- Makes diabetes more difficult to control.
- Stresses your immune system.
- Increases risk for aspiration pneumonia.

Question: What will poor oral care cause in the oral cavity?

Answer: It will cause infection, pain, and disease in the oral cavity which:

- Increases the risk for aspiration pneumonia, gingivitis, periodontal disease, and dental caries.
- Contributes to bad breath.
- Affects your nutrition when it causes loose, broken or missing teeth, sores in your mouth or ill-fitting dentures.
- Decreases chewing ability and proper nutritional intake.

Question: How does poor nutrition affect your oral health?

Answer: It affects the health of your immune system which:

- Increases your risk for dental caries, gingivitis, and periodontal disease.
- Creates an imbalance of vitamins and minerals that can cause mucosal diseases.

Question: How does poor oral health affect nutrition?

Answer: It affects your ability to chew, taste, swallow and communicate by:

- Limiting your ability to eat fresh vegetables, fruits and meat.
- Limiting your choice of desirable diets or foods.
- Increasing the risk for nutritional deficiencies and malnutrition.
- Impacting your ability to eat due to oral pain.

It is important for dietitians to be able to determine the health of the oral cavity, develop a dietary plan, and refer those they serve to a dental professional when an oral health issue is identified. The Iowa CareGivers offers Mouth Care Matters, a class for dietitians, nurses, certified nursing assistants, home care aides, and other direct care staff. The class provides education on the importance of oral health, oral care skills training, oral health assessment and oral care planning for the person served. The class is specialized for the individuals or disciplines attending.

DAILY ORAL CARE = INFECTION CONTROL = BETTER NUTRITION

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I-Smile Silver

The Iowa Department of Public Health administers a pilot project, I-Smile Silver, through contracts with Lee, Scott, and Webster County Health Departments. Counties included are Calhoun, Des Moines, Hamilton, Humboldt, Lee, Pocahontas, Scott, Van Buren, Webster, and Wright. An I-Smile Silver coordinator is available at each health department for educational trainings and other assistance to help older Iowans have good oral health. Contact information for I-Smile Silver coordinators is found at ismile.idph.iowa.gov/about-ismile/silver/.



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Meet Carol, a Registered Dental Hygienist and a Mouth Care Matters consultant and instructor.

Carol Van Aernam is a Mouth Care Matters (MCM) instructor and consultant for Iowa CareGivers. She plays a key role in planning, promoting, and teaching MCM. Carol worked in private dental practice for several years and 34 years for the Veterans Administration and Central Iowa Health Care System as a dental hygienist. She specializes in geriatric care and has presented programs at the local and national levels to those who work in direct care, dietitians, dentists, dental hygienists, and other caregivers. In addition, Carol served as an adjunct instructor for Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) and the University of Iowa.



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*Surgeon General, Report on Oral Health, 2000

All health and long-term service and support (LTSS) professionals/caregivers are expected to work within their Scopes of Practice or job descriptions as defined by the State or employer. Family caregivers are encouraged to contact the dental or medical provider before making changes to a loved one's care plan.

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