

EPILEPSY AND DENTAL HEALTH

Healthy teeth and gums and good oral hygiene are very important to ensure good health and general wellbeing. This is particularly true for persons with epilepsy and can be achieved by following a few simple steps.

INFORMING YOUR DENTIST

Whether your epilepsy diagnosis is new or long-standing it is vitally important to inform your dentist of your epilepsy and any medication you are taking. Take your drugs with you if you cannot remember the name of the various drugs. Also take your seizure diary describing your seizure pattern, duration and any likely seizure triggers.

Discuss with your dentist what actions should be taken if you have a seizure in the surgery to ensure your safety and appropriate care, e.g. the name and contact details of the appropriate person to notify and when it is necessary to call an ambulance. If you are particularly anxious about the visit, it would be helpful to have someone accompany you.

REGULAR DENTAL CHECK-UPS

Your dentist will advise you how often you should have dental check-ups. Do not wait until problems become difficult and painful to treat.

INFANTS AND CHILDREN

Expectant mothers should consider breastfeeding which is good for your baby's dental and general health. It is never too early to introduce a child to dental care. Brushing with a smear of fluoridated toothpaste should start when your baby's first tooth appears. Baby teeth are very important, not only for chewing, but for keeping the space needed for permanent teeth.

Some of these first teeth have to last until the child reaches the age of 11 years. Following a few simple rules will help your child have healthy teeth. Parents play an important role in caring for your child's teeth and training them to look after their teeth as they grow older. It is equally important to ensure that a child does not develop a fear of the dentist. If anxiety is causing your child to have seizures before a visit, discuss this problem with the dentist as it may be possible to prescribe a mild sedative before treatment.

PLAQUE AND CLEANING TEETH

Good oral hygiene is very important for everyone to ensure healthy teeth and gums. Plaque is a sticky film formed from food residues (such as sweets and sugary drinks) which coats your teeth, encouraging bacteria growth and causing tooth decay. Some types of bacteria in plaque cause the formation of acids which attack your teeth while other types produce substances that can harm your gums.

A build-up of plaque can lead to both gum swelling and gum inflammation which, in turn, can cause bleeding gums and lead to gum disease. Gum swelling and inflammation can be painful and affect anyone, but groups at greater risk are young children in the early stage of physical development, adolescents and pregnant and menopausal women undergoing hormonal changes. Pain in your gums during and following brushing may prompt you to stop cleaning your teeth which, in turn, will make the situation worse unless the plaque is removed. The removal of plaque is of prime importance for dental health.

Regular, thorough brushing and flossing after each meal is advised to prevent problems. Dental experts recommend brushing with fluoride toothpaste for three minutes twice daily (preferably after breakfast and before bedtime) rather than brushing less thoroughly more often. Choose an ordinary or electric soft or medium soft toothbrush in good condition – never a hard one - and be sure to brush your gums as well. Bleeding gums after brushing indicates a problem. However, continue brushing and seek dental advice.

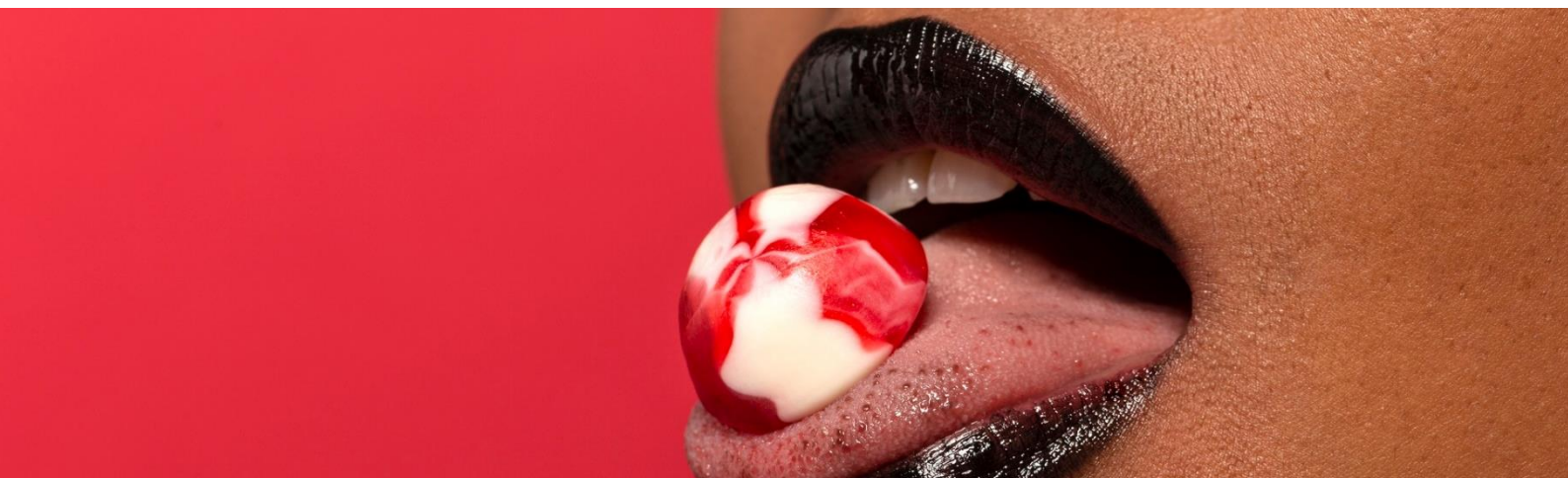
Cleaning children’s teeth should begin as soon as the primary teeth appear (anytime from five months onwards). Use a soft baby toothbrush and a small (pea-sized) quantity of fluoride (1,000 parts fluoride per million) toothpaste. Twice daily supervised cleaning of children’s teeth should be routine.

Most dental surgeries employ a dental hygienist who can offer invaluable help and advice on the day-to-day care of teeth and gums.

DIET AND DENTAL HEALTH

A diet containing a lot of sugar is a major contributor to tooth decay. Bacteria in your mouth feed on the sugar in your diet which creates acid. This acid attacks the enamel of your teeth resulting in dental decay. The best is a healthy and varied diet with as little sugar as possible. Check the labels on containers of processed food as much of the sugar is “hidden” under different names such as fructose, sucrose, molasses, dextrose, glucose, glucose syrup, maltose, corn syrup, honey or caramel.

If “sugar” is one of the first ingredients listed it indicates a higher sugar content. Avoid sugary drinks (including fruit juice) between meals and never put these in your baby’s feeding bottle, rather giving water or milk. Never dip pacifiers (dummies) in sugary liquids. Adults and (particularly) children should be encouraged to develop a taste for a wide range of unsweetened foods, drinks and snacks such as unsweetened cereals, rice, bread, yoghurt, fish, meat and eggs. Eat fruit in preference to sweets and chocolate.



ANTI-EPILEPTIC DRUG (AED) TREATMENT

The majority of people with epilepsy control their seizures with prescribed anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). As some AEDs may have potential adverse side effects on your dental health it is best to ask your doctor/neurologist about:

- The most effective AEDs to control your seizures with minimal side effects. Some AEDs may have side effects affecting the health of your teeth and gums. For example, phenytoin can cause overgrowth of gum tissue. Some drugs such as carbamazepine, primidone and phenobarbitone may cause dryness of the mouth due to changes in the composition or reduction in the production of saliva which is necessary for digestion of food. Other possible oral side effects of AEDs include glossitis (a smooth and painful tongue and oral ulceration) caused by carbamazepine and taste disturbances (phenytoin).
- If you are affected by any of the AED side effects consult your doctor/dentist.
- The most effective format of AEDs. Children with epilepsy prescribed AEDs in syrup form may have problems with their teeth due to the sugar content in the medication, particularly if the dose is taken at night. It may be possible to prescribe sugar-free liquid preparations.
- Reducing the risk of dental problems during pregnancy (to both mother and baby). Women who are planning a pregnancy should consult their doctor about treatment options. Some older AEDs like phenytoin (Epanutin), primidone (Mysoline), carbamazepine (Tegretol) and sodium valproate (Epilim) are associated with a slightly higher risk of birth defects such as a cleft lip and/or palate which can affect your child's speech, eating and confidence.
- Risk assessment of seizures likely to result in facial/dental injury.

DENTAL ACCIDENTS DURING SEIZURES

Some types of seizures such as tonic-clonic (major convulsive) and myoclonic (muscle jerks) may cause fall and injuries to your mouth and gums. In the event of a fall tooth fragments, crowns, fillings or even loose dentures may become dislodged or swallowed. If teeth are damaged arrange an emergency appointment with your dentist as soon as possible.

You might bite the inside of your mouth during a seizure making brushing painful. Dental advisers suggest using Corsodyl mouthwash (available over the counter from pharmacists) rather than brushing until the pain or ulcers subside. You can reduce any swelling by holding a cold compress to your cheek or sucking an ice cube. Hot salt water mouthwash (half a teaspoon of salt to one tumbler of water) can help soothe during a seizure pain and heal your mouth.

ORTHODONTIC TREATMENT

Some children (regardless whether they have epilepsy or not) may require orthodontic treatment. This is not usually undertaken until the child's upper canines (eye teeth) appear at about the age of 11 or 12 years.

Cosmetic dentistry injuries sustained as a result of seizures and the side effects of some medications may cause dental problems that can affect your appearance, speech and self-confidence. Some types of treatment may improve the appearance of your teeth. Seek advice from your dentist.

Contact Epilepsy South Africa for more information

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