How Does Substance Abuse Affect Oral Health?

by SHARON BOYD, RDH

Dental Health and Addiction: What You Need to Know

Battling a substance often affects how we look, including our smiles. When it comes to keeping our teeth healthy and pain-free, there are a few specific concerns you may need to address. Let's get into dental health and addiction.

Pain Medication

If you've built up a tolerance or dependency on specific pain medications, let your dentist know. Sometimes, the best way to combat dental pain is just with ibuprofen, warm salt-water rinses and a cool/warm compress.

Getting treatment early keeps pain to a minimum, and using local anesthesia and laughing gas shouldn't bother you or leave any lingering effects. 99 percent of the time, pain medication is only used when care has been put off too long (or those wisdom teeth decided to make an unexpected appearance.)

There's no need to keep putting your dental care off.

Illicit Drug Use

The use of some drugs can cause people to subconsciously grind their teeth or have a high intake of carbohydrates. Excessive wear can cause teeth to be worn down or even break existing restorations. High-carb diets are linked with rampant decay, so brush often and ask your dentist for a fluoride treatment every visit.

Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol is an irritant that can cause sores, irritated oral tissues and bleeding gums. Increased vomiting may cause enamel erosion, leading to decay or sensitivity.

Instead of brushing your teeth after vomiting, rinse your mouth thoroughly with water. This prevents stomach acid from being spread across the teeth and accelerates the process of tooth decay.

Tips for Addressing Specific Complications with Substance Abuse

- **Dry Mouth:** A daily fluoride rinse or gel is a must, as dry mouths have more decay. Ask your dentist to write you a prescription.
- **Bruxism/Grinding:** Stress or substance abuse often causes people to grind their teeth. Premature wear and damage to restorations are often a result. Ask your dentist to make a bite-splint to prevent this from happening.
- **Oral Sores:** To alleviate discomfort from sore tissues, you can make "miracle mouthwash" for temporary

pain relief. All that is needed is one part liquid Benadryl and 1 part milk of magnesia. Rinse thoroughly or dab onto the area, but don't swallow it. If your sore(s) hasn't healed within two weeks, it's time for a cancer screening.

- **Oral Cancer:** Unfortunately, patients with these conditions are at an increased risk of developing oral cancer. A free cancer screening should be conducted at every dental check-up. Early diagnosis is essential for effective treatment.
- **Periodontal Disease:** An impaired immune system will cause gum disease to be more prevalent. Floss daily, use an electric toothbrush and see your dental hygienist for a cleaning at least twice a year. It's the only way to combat irreversible bone destruction and future loss of your teeth.

It's All Confidential

You need to understand that everything you discuss with your dentist, just like your medical provider, is completely confidential. Dentists and their teams are there to help you, no matter what your history of needs is.

We want you to open up to us to discuss your concerns because that can help us as dental providers better care for your teeth and prevent possible concerns later on. You only have one smile, and we want to help!