

Your smile says a lot

There's so much to think about when you're diagnosed with HIV that seeing a dentist often falls low on the list of priorities. However, keeping your mouth healthy at this time is critical. Your mouth, teeth, and gums reflect the overall health of your body, and people living with HIV are at higher risk of developing problems at some point.

Susan Fletcher, DDS

Everyone's mouth is full of bacteria (germs) growing on the teeth and gums. Regular brushing is needed to keep the bacterial level low and clean the tissue. As a further defense, the teeth are lined up side by side to form a barrier, like the Great Wall of China. Gum tissue jutting out from between the teeth contains blood vessels that carry defense cells to the surface, serving as "forts" along the Great Wall. Saliva produced by glands in and around the mouth contains powerful antimicrobial (germ-killing) substances. Saliva washes away bacteria and debris to help prevent infections. Healthy teeth and gums prevent bacteria from gaining access to the body.

Vulnerable teeth and gums

As the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) attacks the body's defense system, the mouth becomes much more vulnerable to infection. HIV affects salivary glands and alters the quality and quantity of saliva produced. Less saliva means less protection for mouth tissue. Bacteria can then grow faster, causing the gums to swell up and altering tissue resistance to make the teeth and gums more susceptible to bacterial attack.

HIV also locks onto and destroys important defense cells called CD4 cells. Loss of these vital cells allows normally harmless bacteria to cause infections. These are called opportunistic infections, because they can only occur if the body's defenses are weakened.


Oral health problems closely associated with HIV disease progression include aggressive gum infections (called necrotizing ulcerative gingivitis), white patches on the sides of the tongue that may be caused by a virus called "oral hairy leukoplakia," and dark purplish red swellings that may signal Kaposi's Sarcoma. The most common oral opportunistic infection, affecting over 95% of people with HIV, is oral candidiasis, caused by a fungus, *candida albicans*. The soft whitish/yellowish plaques it produces in the mouth can be treated with antifungal medication, but because persistent candidiasis is linked to low CD4 counts, effective antiretroviral (ARV) therapy to restore immune function is essential.

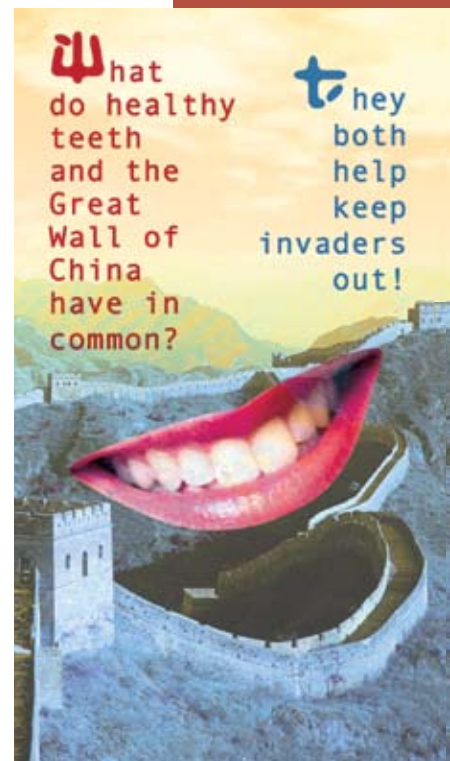
More than toothpaste

The state of your teeth, gums and mouth reflects your general state of health. Keeping an eye out for changes provides valuable warning that HIV disease may be progressing.

If you have HIV and develop oral (mouth) disease, this is often a signal of disease progression, usually indicating a loss of CD4 cells. Although dental treatment will help some oral diseases, many will recur and may become persistent unless ARV treatment is started. Antiretrovirals reduce the virus in the body to very low levels, and stop the CD4 cells from being destroyed. In this way, medication taken regularly will reduce the risk of oral infections.

Although you may develop problems in your mouth, small changes in your oral care can help prevent or minimize them. Here are 10 easy ways to improve your oral health:

- Brush your teeth twice a day and always at bedtime (since saliva isn't produced while you sleep).
- Get dental checkups and cleanings every six months, and have cavities and gum disease treated.
- Try to floss daily, and if flossing is a problem, discuss other options with your dentist.
- Stop smoking as it increases the risk of gum disease (ask your physician for help with this).
- Eat fresh fruit and vegetables daily.
- Reduce sugary foods and soft drinks in your diet.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Chew sugarless gum to help increase saliva.
- Avoid mouth rinses with high alcohol content. Try rinsing with 1 tsp. of baking soda dissolved in warm water instead.
- Encourage your partner to follow the same steps, since bacteria can be transmitted through intimate contact, such as kissing. 



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