



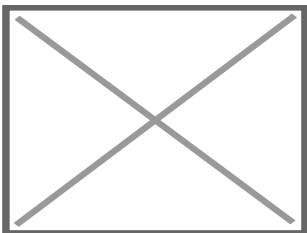
Newsletter Articles

How can I help my ageing parents look after their teeth?



How Can I Help My Aging Parents Look After Their Teeth?

By Paul Ansell - Dentist



If you've ever owned something valuable or complex for a long time, you realise the need to apply a lot more TLC in order to keep it in good condition.

If it's a vintage car or an old house, it's highly likely it has done a lot of miles, had its doors opened thousands of times, and is generally starting to fatigue, and let's be honest, is looking a bit frail and tired.

And then you have that neighbour, the house-proud one who cuts their front lawn with a hand-push mower, oils the deck, and paints the fence every year, keeping a protective barrier over the

fatiguing timber and making it last.

You can probably guess where this metaphor is going when it comes to dental health. For many, their teeth are largely out of sight and out of mind until something crumbles, gets loose, falls out, or starts really hurting. At that point, it is often too late. Broken teeth are painful, sharp to the tongue, and their ultimate loss has a significant impact on nutrition, speech, personal pride, and socialisation. It makes sense: you are less confident and chatty when missing teeth. The feeling of falling apart, especially for those who have spent a lifetime caring for and maintaining themselves, can be profoundly distressing. Therefore, the preservation of one's dental health is closely aligned with personal pride and dignity.

The hits rack up over a lifetime, and recent Australian statistics show that 24 out of our 28 teeth (not 32, as wisdom teeth don't get counted) for those aged over 75 are either decayed, missing, or filled. This is more than double the amount of those in their 50s. So the rate of problems accelerates as you get older.

Of course, people won't live forever, but it definitely looks like we outlive our teeth and can suffer extensively due to their deterioration.

[Source](#)

For the elderly, a significant amount of time and money is spent on health interventions. With general cost of living pressures in other areas, it makes sense not to be burdened with repair work at the dentist that can be minimised with an effective preventive care regimen. This means doing things differently to how they have been done before. The extra TLC.

You can assist your parents by encouraging trips to a dentist who is proactive about preventive home care and by taking the time to provide products, education, and upgrades to the daily routine.

You likely don't even know your parents' oral health status. And why would you? It's hardly dinner party conversation.

Do they:

- Have all their natural teeth?
- Have full dentures?
- Have partial dentures?
- Have implants?
- Have bridges?
- Have all of the above?
- Have a history of other dental pathology?

They might have the equivalent of a 50-year-old Rolls Royce in their mouth...

But before you say, “Old people are stubborn,” the process ideally needs to start earlier where possible. You know your folks better than anyone and know how they might respond to change. With their best interests at heart, it is a matter of understanding their needs, making suggestions, and lowering the barrier to accessing good advice and having a person they trust reinforce the information.

Put simply, the preventive dental care requirements **MUST** change to counteract the rapid decline in oral health due to factors such as:

- Dry mouth due to age and medication side effects (this is a HUGE issue – as saliva flow reduces, decay-causing plaque becomes sticky, and there is no natural protection for teeth amongst a myriad of other problems. The oral environment becomes an inhospitable place!)
- Increased complexity and age of previous dental work.
- Reduced dexterity.
- Changes to diet and types of food.

There are a range of products that are more appropriate than what your folks have been using for the last 30 years of their lives. Equally important, there are some simple fixes or substitutions to diet and lifestyle that can reduce the negative impacts on oral health.

- The use of toothpastes that are more effective at decay prevention and less drying.
- The addition of dry mouth gels or sprays.
- Minimising sugar and lollies or offering sugar-free or Xylitol options.
- Offering different ways to brush and floss, such as easy-grip handles.
- If your parents are in care homes, check that a dental care regimen and appropriate products are in place.

You should never underestimate the comfort, confidence, and function a happy, healthy oral environment brings. Of course, this requires awareness, changes, monitoring, and an increase in budget for preventive care, but slowing the decay and feeling of helplessness is well worth the effort.

All good prevention goes hand in hand with seeing a dentist to address specific problems and for thorough screening and maintenance.

By Paul Ansell - Registered Dentist