



# Tobacco, alcohol & recreational drugs – how do they affect oral health?

Information for people working with young people

## Information for people working with young people

Issues concerning the use of tobacco, alcohol and recreational drugs are likely to be faced by young people at some point in their lives. The effects of these substances on overall health are well known. However their effects on oral health are often unrecognised.

- **Tooth loss and gum disease** – tobacco can damage the gum tissues causing inflammation and periodontal disease (gum disease). Use of tobacco, ecstasy, amphetamines, methamphetamines (smoked methamphetamine in particular) can also lead to tooth loss by constricting the small capillaries in the gums, affecting how the bone attaches to the soft tissue of teeth
- **Dry mouth** – use of alcohol, marijuana, ecstasy, amphetamines, methamphetamines, heroin and replacement therapies such as methadone limit saliva production causing dry mouth. This dramatically increases the risk of tooth decay, gum disease and erosion
- **Tooth decay and erosion** – the dry mouth effects described above all contribute to tooth decay and erosion. Ecstasy raises body temperature, which can lead to an increase in the consumption of sugary drinks. Most alcoholic drinks are very sugary and acidic. Frequent consumption of these drinks will demineralise and weaken tooth enamel, which is the first step in tooth decay. Vomiting after drinking alcohol can cause erosion of the teeth
- **Tooth grinding and jaw clenching** – tooth grinding and jaw clenching can occur with ecstasy, cocaine, amphetamine and methamphetamine use. Tooth grinding is known as bruxism and can lead to extreme wear, especially when combined with dry mouth. It can cause cracked and broken teeth and nerve damage
- **Staining and bad breath** – smoking cigarettes contributes to bad breath, the build up of tartar on teeth and the staining of teeth, tongue and gums. Staining may appear yellow or black
- **Poor oral hygiene** – excessive alcohol consumption and drug use can result in neglected oral hygiene self-care
- **Oral cancer** – tobacco contains carcinogens, and is a major risk factor associated with oral cancer. Excessive consumption of alcohol significantly raises the risk of oral cancer, and when combined with smoking tobacco this risk is increased even more dramatically. Like tobacco, smoking marijuana also increases the risk of developing oral cancer

Dental Health Services Victoria is the State's leading public dental agency, promoting oral health, purchasing services and providing care to Victorians  
[www.dhsv.org.au](http://www.dhsv.org.au)

Call 1300 360 054 for more information,  
or visit [www.dhsv.org.au/findaclinic](http://www.dhsv.org.au/findaclinic)



dental health  
services victoria



### What can you recommend to assist young people in maintaining their oral health?

- Maintain good oral hygiene. Brush teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and a toothbrush that has a small, compact head and soft bristles. When the bristles appear 'shaggy' it is time to change toothbrush
- Flossing once a day is recommended. There may be some bleeding at first if gums are unhealthy, but this should subside after a few days if tooth cleaning is thorough. If bleeding persists, seek advice from a dental professional
- Limit sugars and foods high in processed carbohydrates to mealtimes only (rather than between meals). Limit soft drinks and sports drinks as they will quickly cause decay and erode (dissolve) the tooth enamel
- Encourage young people to choose snacks such as cheese, yoghurt, fresh fruit and vegetables, dry biscuits, nuts and wholegrain bread, and to drink milk and water
- Water (particularly tap water) should be encouraged as the drink of choice between meals
- Chew sugar-free gum to stimulate saliva flow and help protect teeth from decay
- If any changes in oral health are experienced, such as sores that don't heal or red or white patches on lips or tongue, a dental professional should be contacted immediately
- There are a number of methods available through your dental clinic to remove staining from the teeth. See a dental professional
- Binge drinking may cause vomiting. If vomiting does occur the mouth should be rinsed thoroughly with water, and if possible, toothpaste rubbed on the teeth with a finger to remineralise the tooth enamel and to freshen the mouth. A toothbrush should not be used for at least 30 minutes after vomiting
- The best thing that can be done to combat the oral health risks of tobacco use is to quit smoking. Quit Victoria can be contacted for further information and support. **Call 13 7848 or visit [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au)**
- There are organisations that provide resources, support and assistance for workers, for people who use recreational drugs and others seeking information on alcohol, drugs and drug prevention. These include the Australian Drug Foundation ([www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)), the Drug Info Clearinghouse ([www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)), and the Youth Substance Abuse Service ([www.ysas.org.au](http://www.ysas.org.au))

**Secondary school students and school leavers under 18 who have a Health Care Card or a Pensioner Concession Card (or parents with one) can access free dental care at their local Community Dental Clinic.**

Dental Health Services Victoria is the State's leading public dental agency, promoting oral health, purchasing services and providing care to Victorians  
[www.dhsv.org.au](http://www.dhsv.org.au)

**Call 1300 360 054 for more information,  
or visit [www.dhsv.org.au/findaclinic](http://www.dhsv.org.au/findaclinic)**



dental health  
services victoria