

### Substance abuse

Most people are aware that abuse of substances such as alcohol and illegal drugs (methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine, cannabis and ecstasy) can cause physical and mental health problems. However, one that many individuals are unaware of is the effect substance abuse can have on oral health.

The consumption of alcohol should not exceed the Chief Medical Officers' guidelines. It is safest to not drink more than 14 units per week. Alcohol consumption above these levels is a major cause of illness, injury and premature death.

Some drugs can have a devastating effect on teeth and gums. Unfortunately, many addicts do not practice good oral hygiene meaning tooth decay, gum disease and cracked teeth are common. Sadly, many will not seek help from the dental team and their oral health dwindles. It's paramount to get help when necessary.

### What is it? (signs)

The following list can be potential signs that can indicate substance abuse.

- Increased risk of oral cancer (the most important risk factors for oral cancers are the combined effect of tobacco use and consumption of alcohol. Together they account for approximately three quarters of oral cancer cases)
- Increased halitosis (bad breath)
- Increased risk of trauma and facial injury through accidental falls, road traffic accidents or violence
- Increased risk of gum disease
- Dry mouth – Xerostomia
- Increased dental decay/High decay rate
- Tooth loss
- Severe recession where by drugs are rubbed into the gums near the teeth
- Taste impairment
- Burning mouth
- Eating difficulties
- Infections
- Gum disease

Alcohol issues often present in the mouth as:  
The acidity of alcoholic drinks and vomit erodes enamel.



### What does it look like/what might I feel (symptoms)

Being high on drugs makes it less likely the user will remember to brush their teeth regularly. Poor oral hygiene could lead to gum disease, dental decay and tooth loss. Many drugs can cause a craving for sugar, such as sticky sweets and fizzy drinks, which cause tooth decay. See the separate advice leaflet 'Tooth decay/Dental caries' for further information or click here <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/tooth-decay/>.

Dry mouth is often caused by methamphetamine and heroin. Reduced saliva flow is uncomfortable and can increase the risk of tooth decay and gum disease. Heroin users often have dental decay even if their oral hygiene is good. See the separate advice leaflet 'Dry mouth/Xerostomia' for further information or click here <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dry-mouth/>.

Cracked or broken teeth can result from jaw clenching and tooth grinding (bruxism) associated with ecstasy and cocaine. Cocaine is linked to perforation of the palate and gum recession. See the separate advice leaflet 'Jaw problems' or click here <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/temporomandibular-disorder-tmd/>.

Drinking alcohol above recommended levels adversely affects general and oral health with the most significant oral health impact being the increased risk of oral cancer. See the separate advice leaflet 'Oral cancer' or click here <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/mouth-cancer/>.

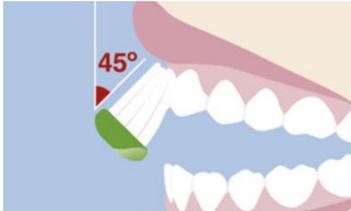
**What can I do myself to help?**

A good oral hygiene routine can reduce some of the damage cause by substance abuse. Nevertheless, reducing or stopping these bad habits would be best for your overall health and maintenance of your teeth and gums.

Brush at least twice daily with a fluoridated toothpaste. Brush teeth last thing at night and at least on one other occasion.

Toothpaste should contain more than 1350ppm (parts per million) fluoride. Your toothbrush should have a small head with medium texture bristles.

Brush two or three teeth along with the gums at a 45 degree angle.



Spit out after brushing and do not rinse the mouth with water. Leaving toothpaste on the teeth will help maintain fluoride concentration.

Keep sugar to meal times. It's not just the amount of sugar but the frequency of sugar consumed throughout the day that causes dental decay.

Dentures should be cleaned at least once a day using a non-abrasive denture paste. They should be put in a lidded pot full of cold water over night. See separate leaflet 'Dentures' or click here: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dentures/>

We would advise to visit a dentist regularly.

Public Health England | Healthmatters Sugar and tooth decay

Sugars in foods and drinks are the major cause of tooth decay

An infographic on a dark blue background. On the left, there are four items representing sugary drinks: a glass of orange juice, a small cup of coffee with a red top, a green can of soda, and a white can of soda. A large white 'X' is drawn over these items. On the right, there are two items representing healthy alternatives: a glass of water with a blue straw and a glass of white milk with a green straw. A large green checkmark is drawn over these items. Below the items, there is a white text box with the following text: 'Reduce the amount of foods and drinks that contain "free" sugars Swap sugary drinks for water or plain milk to prevent tooth decay'.

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