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THE FUTURE OF MEDICINE IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

WOMEN

Postpartum Depression

SENIOR

Aging in Place

DIET & NUTRITION

Whole Foods

MENTAL

Happiness & Optimism

DENTAL

Keeping your Teeth



Keeping *Your* Teeth

By Kary Karahadian, D.D.S. and Edward Karahadian, D.D.S.

IF YOU WERE BORN BEFORE 1970, YOU PROBABLY REMEMBER PEOPLE HEADING INTO RETIREMENT JOKING THAT THEY WOULD BE RECEIVING, "A POCKET WATCH, A HANDSHAKE, AND A SET OF DENTURES."

It used to be that losing your teeth was part of growing old. Anyone over the age of 50 surely remembers one or more older family members with dentures. Now, fast forward to the present. The children of

today will not have these memories as they grow up. Not only are we living longer, but due to advances in dental medicine and a relatively recent emphasis on fitness and vitality in middle to older aged people ("80 is the new 60"), the large majority of us will never know what it means to lose our teeth and to live with dentures.

We are living longer than ever before. Life spans have been increasing for over a hundred years and most of us expect to enjoy life well into our 70's and 80's, many even into our 90's. According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the



average life span is likely to increase another 10 years by 2050. Increased longevity is having a significant impact on the dental profession. A new practice demographic has appeared: large numbers of elder patients that have their own teeth. Never before in human history have so many people lived so long with their own teeth. A study by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and the National Institute of Health found that the percentage of adults over 60 who have lost all their teeth has dropped from one-third to one-fourth over the past decade. Dentists who were busy fabricating dentures in the 70's and 80's now find the same procedure to be much less common. We pat ourselves on the back and raise a glass to our successes. Certainly, no denture wearer would ever choose to keep his false teeth if he could set the clock back and keep his own, healthy ones.

However, these dental health successes come with new concerns. As we age, we place more demands on all parts of our

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bodies. Knee and hip replacement surgeries are as common today as tonsillectomies were in the 50s. Worn out heart valves are replaced with new ones.

Our teeth suffer a similar fate as we age. The enamel we have at 12 years of age is all we will ever have. The smile that served us well when our average life span was 45-50 is now being asked to last twice as long.

Aside from all the benefits of having our own teeth as we move into our elder years, there still comes risk. Elder patients may be on any number of prescription drugs which can have severe drying effects on the mouth. Even modest reductions in saliva,

can upset the delicate balance that exists in our mouths. With this decrease in saliva comes a dramatic increase in the rate of dental decay. It is not uncommon to see rampant tooth decay develop quickly in the mouth of a person that hadn't had a cavity in decades, simply because the amount of saliva in their mouth decreased.

Keeping our own teeth attractive and free from disease requires continual, excellent oral hygiene and dietary habits. Consider all the things we do on a daily basis to maintain the health of our smile: brushing 2-3 times a day, daily flossing, eating healthy, and avoiding overindulgence in junk food. Many older patients suffer from dexterity problems and diminished visual acuity that can make effective, daily dental hygiene a major challenge. Eating patterns can change with age. The job of avoiding dental problems becomes more difficult to manage as we grow older.

Teeth can be compared to tires: there is only so much tread on them. If enamel is

CHOICES *for a* HEALTHY SMILE

Strategies to promote future (as well as present) dental health should be instituted at an early age. Here are a few suggestions:

Nightly fluoride mouth rinsing.

Dietary instruction regarding foods that place teeth at risk for decay. This would include diet soda, and you don't need sugar to get decay; highly acidic beverages (anything carbonated) are the single biggest cause of decay. Other big offenders are breath mints, cough lozenges and antacids that contain sugar to enhance their taste.

Make sure your dentist is well trained in the prevention and treatment of bite disease.

Development of excellent hygiene habits now.

Controlling bite-related wearing down of the teeth as soon as it is first noticed.

Consultation with the patient's physician regarding medications that can affect saliva flow.

Work in conjunction with the physician to manage gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) if present. Stomach acid in the mouth can quickly devastate teeth.

Treating old, worn out dental fillings and teeth while the patient is still healthy and vigorous.

Removing any weak, unhealthy teeth before an age related decline in health begins, and replacement with implants.

worn away due to an unhealthy bite and/or clenching before we reach our elder years, major reconstructive dentistry may be needed to avoid eventual dentures. This transition from worn down teeth to dentures in the elder years is very difficult for the patient.

By avoiding dentures, people are enjoying the benefits of their own smile far longer than all the generations that have preceded them. We have, however, created a new health liability for our elders at a time in their lives when surely they will be faced with other health challenges. Therefore, you might ask, have we really done a service to patients by helping them avoid the inevitability of dentures? It is an odd thought perhaps, but dentures never get cavities or gum disease!

We believe that for most people, the answer to this question is YES. But if we are to keep our teeth for the future, we must alter the paradigms of the past. Saving teeth only to have them eventually succumb to decay when the patient is in the last years of his/her life is a tragedy. Providing extensive dental care for an elder in declining health is very challenging for the dentist, and more importantly, very difficult and sometimes impossible for the patient.

So this is the dilemma that your dentist is faced with. When examining a healthy 60, 70 or 80 year-old (or 30 year-old for that matter), he/she must not only look at

the present but, envision possible future scenarios in which their teeth may become a liability and help you develop individualized strategies to maintain a healthy smile.

The great news is that, to a large extent, dentists do have the ability to help patients avoid these worst-case scenarios of elder dental decline. Ask your dentist to discuss the effects of aging on teeth with you at your next visit.

Dental implants are an extremely important tool in helping elders avoid dentures. Dental implants allow a patient to enjoy life with no risk of decay or gum disease, even if their health were to begin to decline.

Proactively identifying and treating bite disease and the tooth wear that comes with it are of utmost importance. A little wear on the teeth of a 40 year old can easily translate into major dental problems at age 70 or 80.

The benefits of a healthy smile as we age are many. An attractive smile complements our sense of vitality and self esteem. We are able to enjoy the same foods that we did in our youth. The health benefits to the rest of our body include lowered risks of heart disease and diabetes due to the absence of gum disease. While the 'pocket watch and the handshake' are still part of our world, with proper guidance and care, dentures don't have to be. All of us can and should have the opportunity to enjoy healthy smiles for a lifetime. ■

