Dental health contributes to general health and wellness, self-esteem and quality of life. For many people living with mental illness, dental health may be a low priority when other treatment and health issues must also be addressed.

People with mental illness have increased risks of dental disease due to fear, costs, habits, life-style choices, distrust of dentists, negative past experiences or stigma felt at a dentist visit.

These also have a negative impact on oral health: being homeless or in environments of poor hygiene; lack of knowledge about oral hygiene; lack of awareness of their own oral health problems; side effects from certain medications, illicit drugs or tobacco.

**Dental Health and Psychiatric Disorders**
Oral symptoms may be the first or only manifestation of a mental health problem and include facial pain, preoccupation with dentures, excessive palatal erosion or self-inflicted injury. Other symptoms include enamel erosion (sign of anorexia or bulimia), burning mouth syndrome (sign of anxiety and/or depression).

**Dental Health and Drug Use**
Drug use generally results in decreased self-image, depression and lack of motivation all of which impact oral health, dietary habits and oral hygiene. Caries are high due to poor diet, high sugar intake and use of methadone linctus in syrup form. Periodontal disease is high usually due to neglect and/or smoking.

**Dental Health and Medications’ Side Effects**
Certain psychiatric medications have side effects that impact oral health. The most common is a reduction in salivary secretions (xerostomia) often experienced as dry mouth. This may show difficulty with speech, chewing, swallowing, poor denture tolerance, problems with retention and stability of dentures, or dental trauma. Other side effects include abnormal, involuntary movement of the tongue, facial muscles, or jaw (dyskinesia and dystonia), and forceful excursive movements of the jaw with grinding of the teeth (bruxism).

**FACTS:**
- Gum disease is a major cause of about 70% of tooth loss in adults.
- Methamphetamine users have 9 times greater risk of tooth decay in comparison to non-methamphetamine users.
- Heroin users have 5 times greater risk of tooth decay than non users.
- Cocaine users have 4 times greater risk than non-users of having dental decay.
- Tobacco smokers or "chewers" are 4 times more likely to develop oral cancer than non smokers.
- In general, people with an intellectual disability have worst oral health than those without this condition.

**When Discussing Dental Health with Your Patients:**
- Keep the conversation simple, clear, and understandable.
- Establish the value and importance of oral hygiene and dental health.
- Recommend that when visiting a dentist, patients who are on psychiatric medications share information on the specific medications and doses with their dental health provider. In addition to understanding any dental side effects, many medications may have negative side effects when combined with dental medications.
- Emphasize the importance of a good diet and exercise for overall health including dental health.
Interventions for Common Medications' Side Effects

The bottom line issue of concern is usually tooth decay. A toothbrush and dental floss are the most important weapons in the fight against tooth decay. Fluoride rinses also help combat bacteria. Other interventions include:

**Xerostomia**
If a change to the patient's treatment is not possible, options for the long-term management of xerostomia include dietary modification, saliva substitutes, regular sipping of water and non-pharmacological salivary flow stimulators such as sugarless chewing gum. Sialagogues such as the cholinergic agonist pilocarpine (such as diluted eye drops administered topically in the mouth) can be particularly useful for short-term use, but their utility may be limited by systemic adverse effects such as headache, sweating and diarrhea. Dental management of a patient with xerostomia requires increased dental recalls for oral hygiene instruction, fluoride application and early intervention.

**Dyskinesia and dystonia**
The first step is generally to stop or minimize the use of neuroleptic drugs. However, for patients with a severe underlying condition this may not be a feasible option. Replacing neuroleptic drugs with substitute drugs may help some patients. Other drugs such as benzodiazepines, adrenergic antagonists, and dopamine agonists may also be beneficial.

**Bruxism**
The complications of persistent bruxism can be reduced by the use of an occlusal splint.

**Tips to Engage Patients in Dental Care**
- Encourage independence in daily oral hygiene. Involve your patients in hands-on demonstrations of brushing and flossing.
- Emphasize noncariogenic foods and beverages as snacks. Advise caregivers to avoid using sweets as incentives or rewards.
- Advise patients taking medicines that cause xerostomia to drink water often. Suggest sugar-free medicine if available and stress the importance of rinsing with water after dosing.
- Recommend preventive measures such as fluorides and sealants.
- Some patients cannot brush and floss independently due to impaired physical coordination or cognitive skills. Talk to their caregivers about daily oral hygiene. A power toothbrush or a floss holder can simplify oral care.
- Some patients benefit from the daily use of an antimicrobial agent such as chlorhexidine. Recommend an appropriate delivery method based on your patient's abilities. Rinsing, for example, may not work for a patient who has swallowing difficulties or one who cannot expectorate. Chlorhexidine applied using a spray bottle or toothbrush is equally beneficial.
- If a mouth guard can be tolerated, prescribe one for patients who have problems with self-injurious behavior or habits like bruxism, mouth breathing, tongue thrusting, eating objects and substances such as gravel, cigarette butts, or pens.

ONLINE TOOLS

- [www.atsu.edu/asdoh/](http://www.atsu.edu/asdoh/) Arizona’s School of Dentistry and Oral Health - have online resources and low cost dental care clinics
- [www.letsmove.gov/healthcareproviders.php](http://www.letsmove.gov/healthcareproviders.php) Printable prescription to give to patients and more
- [www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity](http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity) For more information on physical activity guidelines and handouts for patients

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