

Take care of your teeth

Don't be resigned to poor dental health as you get older, there is still much you can do to keep your teeth in tip-top condition



ALTHOUGH IT may seem to be a downside of the ageing process, there is actually nothing inevitable about losing your teeth as you get older.

The simple fact is that, thanks to improvements in dental technology, improved diet and greater awareness of what's bad for us, most people who turn 50 now do so with many, if not all, of their own teeth intact.

Modern dentistry provides many effective ways to pair and replace your teeth and restore your appearance and there is also a greater emphasis on prevention of dental disease. This means you can keep your teeth for life, and they no longer need to have large unsightly fillings.

If, however, you do have problems with your teeth there are many ways to restore them to good working order. Professor Andrew Eder runs the London Tooth Wear Centre and specialises in restorative dentistry and tooth wear. He is an expert on advising and treating teeth that have suffered from erosion, abrasion, attrition and abfraction (loss of tooth structure and enamel), the most common causes of tooth wear.

Professor Eder believes that, in general, our teeth are healthier now than, say, 30 years ago. "Fluoride in water and toothpaste is causing less decay and there is a far greater understanding of gum disease and how to avoid it," he says.

Lifestyle can, however, still have a big impact on the health of our teeth, as Professor Eder points out.

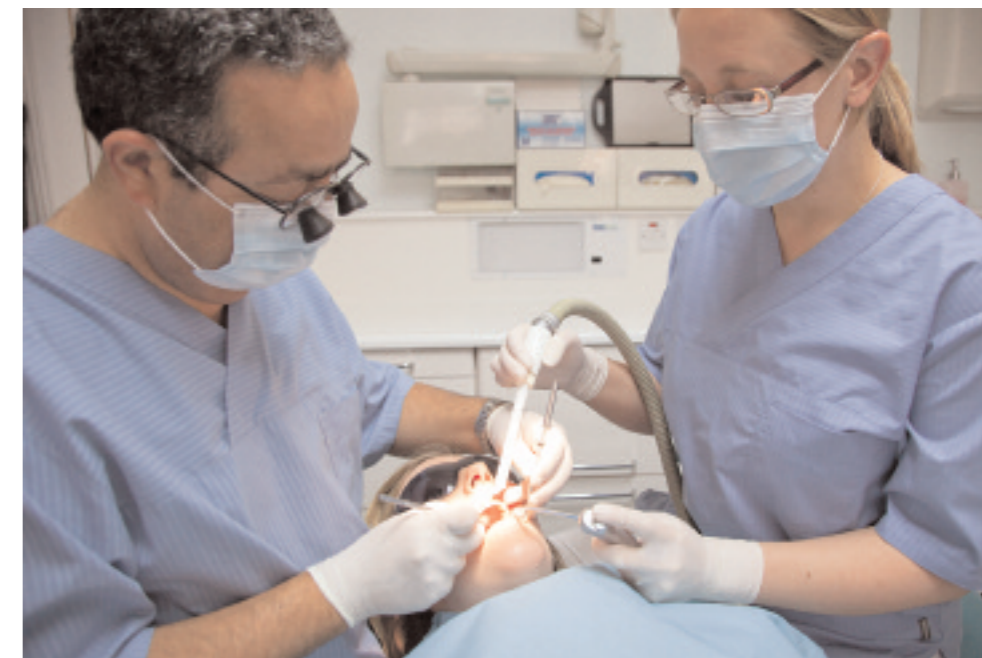
"Acidic foods and drinks cause

erosion of the teeth, and abrasive foods wear away the teeth, so it is very important to be aware of what we are eating and how it can affect our teeth. Some medications, for example effervescent calcium, can cause acid erosion and certain antidepressants can also cause a dry mouth and more decay. Another factor can be stress, which may result in tooth grinding, leading to cracked teeth or short teeth.

"The rise in sports drinks has also seen more tooth wear in those who regularly drink them as they are very acidic. Alcohol is also very acidic and will cause erosion in time."

Professor Eder says the most common forms of tooth wear that he encounters are due to acidic foods and drinks, tooth grinding and even vigorous tooth brushing. Older people tend to suffer from tooth decay, gum disease, tooth wear and mouth dryness, which is often due to medications and the salivary glands no longer working effectively.

Tooth problems can have an impact on our general health, too, with studies showing a link between



poor dental health and increased risk of diabetes and heart disease.

Symptoms of unhealthy teeth include shadowing or dark areas, teeth appearing longer, which can indicate gum disease, and teeth becoming shorter, sharper or changing colour. Just because your teeth may be a little yellow is not,

however, an automatic indicator of decay, as Professor Eder explains:

"The deeper part of the teeth, the dentine is slightly yellow, and so will show if there is tooth wear and some of the enamel has been lost. Highly fluoridated teeth can also appear yellower and these tend to be more resistant to decay so can



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How to look after your teeth

- ✓ Visit your dentist at recommended intervals which suit your dental condition and age, to screen for dental disease and more serious diseases of the mouth. Your dentist will advise how often you should be attending. Also try to make regular appointments to see a dental hygienist
- ✓ Tell your dentist about any general health problems and any medication you are taking as this may affect your dental health and treatment
- ✓ Use fluoridated toothpaste and possibly also a fluoride mouth rinse. Avoid abrasive whitening toothpastes
- ✓ To prevent decay of the necks of the teeth near your gums, pay strict attention to brushing your teeth and use dental floss between the teeth to remove plaque
- ✓ A healthy, balanced diet with avoidance of sweet food and drink between meals is important to prevent the need for dental fill-

ings or tooth loss. Try to limit food containing carbohydrates and acids, as these cause decay and erosion. Eat cheese after anything really acidic to neutralize the acidity

- ✓ Avoid extended or prolonged acid intake (if having a can of coke, drink it all at one time rather than sipping over an hour or two)
- ✓ Never place an aspirin or other painkiller against a sore tooth as this will burn the gum.
- ✓ If you have full dentures, clean your mouth and dentures thoroughly each day and have both checked by your dentist every few years
- ✓ Reduce your alcohol intake and drink acidic drinks cold with a wide-bore straw
- ✓ If suffering from stress or notable tooth grinding, find ways to learn to relax and you may even wish to invest in a protective mouth guard
- ✓ Any longstanding (more than ten to 14 days) mouth ulcers should be checked out by your doctor or dentist as oral cancers do occur and early detection is essential for good treatment and outcomes.

actually be 'healthier' than white teeth." Another commonly held belief is that it is possible to clean your teeth too much, wearing away protective enamel.

"It is more about technique than how much," Professor Eder replies. "Too much can certainly cause abrasion from the increased contact between tooth and brush. It is generally recommended that your brush for two to three minutes in the morning and again at night while also flossing or brushing between teeth."

Find out more

■ For more information about dental care and the work of the London Toothwear Clinic go to: (www.ltwc.co.uk).