



# AVOID STRESS

And its negative impact on your oral health.

**Together, all the way.®**





Many people are aware of physical symptoms commonly associated with stress – a change in eating habits, high blood pressure, headaches and stomachaches. There are also common emotional symptoms, including depression, anxiety and irritability.

But did you know that stress can also affect your oral health? It's important not only to recognize the signs that can bring about changes in oral health, but also to treat the condition and relieve the stress associated with bringing on the condition. Because everyone experiences stress differently, it's a good idea to be able to recognize what your early warning signs are.

### Oral conditions associated with stress

The following is a list of ways that stress can impact your oral health.

- **Jaw joint issues, such as temporomandibular joint disorder (TMD) or myofascial pain syndrome (MPS)** – disorders of the jaw joint or chewing muscles that can cause pain around the ear or face
- **Bruxism** – grinding of the teeth, either during the day (especially when concentrating) or at night
- **Poor oral hygiene** caused by lack of good brushing and flossing – can lead to tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease
- **Cold sores** – commonly triggered by dental treatment, stress and sunlight (caused by the herpes simplex virus HSV-1)
- **Stress-induced oral infections or sores** – may show up as ulcers, white lines, or white or red spots
- **Decreased immune response** – can be caused by stress and can contribute to the development of periodontal (gum) disease\*

### What you can do to help improve your oral health and reduce stress

Be sure to talk to your dentist about any stress-related symptoms you may be experiencing. It is also important to reduce the stress that's causing the oral health problems.

### How to alleviate painful symptoms

Here are some tips on how you may be able to reduce your symptoms. It's a good idea to start by discussing treatment options with your dentist.

- If you grind your teeth, talk to your dentist about getting a custom-fitted night guard to prevent tooth damage caused from grinding and clenching. The night guard also creates a cushion to remove some stress on the aching muscles and joint tissues.
- Avoid hard or crunchy foods when you're having pain.
- Avoid tobacco and alcohol as coping mechanisms. These products can make your oral symptoms worse.
- Try gentle massage, physical therapy or pain relief medications.
- Talk to your health care provider or dentist about prescription medications, such as anti-inflammatory drugs for inflammation of the jaw joint, and antiviral drugs, which are an effective preventive measure for cold sores.
- To reduce cold sores, stay out of the sun or use a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30.





## How to reduce stress

While treating the symptoms may provide some relief, the largest contributing factor to the symptoms is the stress itself. Using the stress reduction techniques below can help manage painful oral health symptoms.

### Relaxation

- › **Take breaks to relax.** Just a few minutes at home, while you're at lunch or on the bus can make a big difference.
- › **Working excessively** can raise your stress levels. Taking a break if you are under pressure may be difficult, but you'll feel and work better if you do.
- › **Find a way to relax that works for you.** Some common methods are deep breathing exercises, listening to music, taking a walk, reading a book or finding a room for some quiet time.

### Diet and exercise

- › **Get moving.** Take a short run or a brisk walk. Ask a friend or coworker to go with you if you prefer some company. Try something new or rekindle an old hobby.
- › **Eat a diet rich in iron.** Not having enough iron can make you feel tired. Iron-rich foods include red meat, liver, red kidney beans, chickpeas, fortified breakfast cereals, nuts and green leafy vegetables.
- › **Increase serotonin production.** Mood-boosting serotonin requires the amino acid tryptophan, which is found in many protein-rich foods such as dairy, beans, nuts and seeds.

- › **Avoid refined and excess sugar.** Sugary foods provide instant energy and a temporary "high." Once the high is gone, you can be left feeling more tired than before. Sugary snacks are also bad for your teeth.
- › **Stay hydrated.** Make sure you're drinking enough water. Dehydration combined with lots of caffeine can cause drowsiness, headaches, irritability and decreased concentration levels.
- › **Cut the caffeine.** Too much caffeine can make you feel anxious, nervous, jittery and depressed. Try to cut down gradually since you can develop withdrawal effects, such as headaches, if you stop all at once.

### Environment

- › **Take some time away.** Sometimes removing yourself from a stressful situation for a short time allows you to calm yourself. Take a half day off or a short weekend away and give yourself time to think and relax. Taking a break doesn't mean you lack commitment. In fact, it often helps you perform better afterward.
- › **Spend time with friends.** Catching up and talking is great, but consider combining it with a walk, sports, shopping or a visit to a local place of interest.

## Attitude

- › **Change your perspective.** Try to slow down and think about the stressful situation. Is it as bad as it seems? Could it be much worse? If you're late for dinner because you're stuck in traffic, does it really matter? Be realistic about expectations of yourself and others. Try not to stress about situations you have no control over.
- › **Laugh!** Laughter has many benefits, including reducing the level of stress hormones and providing emotional relief from a stressful situation. Make plans with friends or find shows and movies that make you laugh. You'll feel more connected to others and often have a different view of a situation.
- › **Take a look at your thinking patterns.** Try to notice and interrupt negative thoughts. Ask yourself what evidence exists that things won't work out. Think about how you've managed other stressful situations. Sometimes your thoughts can actually increase your stress.



For more resources on managing stress and your dental health, check out [myCigna.com](https://mycigna.com).

## Time management

- › **Eat a healthy breakfast.** Make eating breakfast a regular part of your morning routine to maintain blood sugar levels in the morning and to avoid reaching for unhealthy snacks. And eating breakfast at home makes it easier to brush, floss and rinse.
- › **Develop a bedtime routine.** Establish a pattern that allows you enough time to complete your oral care at a regular time each night.
- › **Prepare for the morning the night before.** Prepare your clothes, paperwork, lunch, and anything else you'll need for the following day the night before, or get up 15 minutes earlier than usual to prevent rushing through the morning routine.
- › **Set limits on your time and resources.** Learn to say "no" to others when you know that you're already at the limit of what you can do. Recognize that you have the right to take time for yourself.
- › **Set priorities.** Reframe your thinking and remember what's really important to you. Consider making a list of what daily self-care is important until it becomes a routine.
- › **Make oral care a priority.** Establish a routine for your oral care and use an alarm to remind you to brush and floss. And make sure to have your teeth cleaned regularly.

Every part of your life can be affected during stressful times – your physical and mental wellness, work performance, and social and family relationships. Taking small steps in the right direction can make a big difference. You may want to consider getting help from a health care or dental provider for more guidance and advice on how to reduce your stress level.



\*"Gum Disease and Risk Factors." American Academy of Periodontology. Accessed January 2019. <<https://www.perio.org/consumer/risk-factors>>.

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