

Q. Is it true that bad teeth can hurt a senior's overall health?

A. Millions of Americans have gum disease, or periodontitis. Recent studies reported by the Harvard Cooperative Program on Aging suggest that teeth are not the only part of your body threatened by diseased gums. Infections that occur in the tissues of the mouth can spread into the bloodstream, and people whose health is already at risk, could have additional problems related to gum disease. For example, studies suggest that common oral bacteria can initiate the forming of blood clots and contribute to clogged arteries, both of which affect heart functioning. Gum disease can also make diabetes worse. Diabetics with gum disease have a harder time maintaining normal blood sugar levels. Pneumonia is a related concern, because several agents that cause pneumonia live in infected tissues of people with gum disease. People with artificial joints and heart valves are also at increased risk for infection when bacteria from diseased gums enters the bloodstream. (More) The best way to cut your risk of gum disease is by daily brushing and flossing your teeth. Because dental care is not covered by Medicare, many older people avoid regular cleanings, and don't have a family dentist. Doctors warn that seniors should make sure they put their money where their mouth is.

Q. I read that learning to play music is good for seniors' health. What's the connection?

A. The University of Miami reports that group music lessons helped decrease anxiety, depression and loneliness among the elderly, but also affected chemical changes in the body as well. For example, forty minute sessions of music making and singing songs increased levels of melatonin in Alzheimer's patients, which allowed participants to sleep better. Music instruction with normal seniors raised melatonin in and human growth hormone (hGH) levels. HGH is linked to energy level, immunity, and sexual functioning. Researchers say they don't know why music causes these changes, but they think relaxation is a key factor. The study of healthy seniors showed added benefits of reduced anxiety, depression and loneliness. Because of the music lessons, seniors reported that they felt less lonely even though they didn't have any more family or caregivers around.

Q. Who wrote the study that showed going to church helps people live longer?

A. A six year study by the Duke University Medical Center claims that people who attend religious services once a week or more have a better chance at longevity than those who don't. The study examined 4,000 elders over a six year period. The analysis revealed that religious attendance did have an impact on health and longevity. The risk of dying for frequent church attendees was 46% lower than for those attending services less often. Researchers say that people who regularly attend church have larger social networks, which may have direct effects on the immune system's ability to fend off disease. Frequent church-going is also related to lower rates of depression and anxiety. Religious involvement was also associated with avoidance of smoking, a major health risk factor. ####