



Brush Up on Oral Health

Discovering the Impact of Stress on Oral Health

Stress is a reaction to a physical, psychological, or emotional demand. Everyone has felt stress at one time or another. Some stress is good because it pushes us to do things that are challenging and meet the demands of daily life. However, too much stress is not good and can have negative short- and long-term effects on our health, including our oral health.

This Brush Up on Oral Health tip sheet describes how stress affects oral health and offers tips to help Head Start staff manage stress.

Stress Affects Oral Health Too!

Long-term stress can cause problems with your mouth, teeth, and gums. These problems can include:

- **Sores in or around the mouth.** Canker sores are small spots with white or grayish centers surrounded by red borders inside the mouth that can cause pain when chewing or talking. Canker sores are not contagious. Cold sores (also called fever blisters) are painful, filled with fluid, and most often appear outside the mouth, on or near the lips. Cold sores can be spread easily to others. Care should be taken to not share utensils or drinks and to not put your hand to your mouth and then touch other things.
- **Teeth clenching and grinding.** Stress may make you clench and grind your teeth. Clenching or biting the top and bottom teeth together tightly happens mostly during waking hours. Grinding is more common during sleep and occurs when the top and bottom teeth rub together. Clenching and grinding can wear down or chip teeth, cause jaw pain, and strain muscles in the face.
- **Tooth decay and gum disease.** In some cases, people under stress adopt unhealthy behaviors, such as snacking on foods or drinks that are high in sugar throughout the day or skipping brushing and flossing, that can increase their risk for oral diseases. To combat stress, some people use alcohol, tobacco, or drugs, which also increases their risk for oral diseases.



Tips to Help Head Start Staff Manage Stress

- **Eat healthy foods.** Eating healthy foods – such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and lean protein – helps you feel good and may help control your moods, too. Skipping meals is not good and can put you in a bad mood, which can increase your stress.
- **Take care of your mouth.** If you grind or clench your teeth, talking to your dentist about getting a bite guard to prevent tooth damage, an aching jaw, and sore facial muscles can help. Your dentist can also recommend over-the-counter medicines or prescribe medicines to treat mouth sores and reduce the pain they cause.
- **Seek treatment for unhealthy habits.** Behavioral health experts and other health professionals can help you change unhealthy habits and find better ways to cope with stress. If you are practicing unhealthy behaviors to reduce stress, ask your physician, dentist, or another health professional or a trusted friend for a referral.
- **Practice relaxation techniques.** To combat stress, it's important to activate the body's natural relaxation response. You can do this by practicing mindfulness, breathing deeply, meditating, and exercising. These activities can help boost your energy and mood and improve your mental and physical health, including your oral health.
- **Talk to friends, family, and coworkers.** Talking about things that bother you with friends, family, and coworkers is one of the best ways to handle stress. Face-to-face or telephone conversations are better than texting or using social media to communicate. Have a conversation about what's going on and listen to other people's viewpoints, which may give you ideas on how to manage stress.



Check out resources produced by National Center for Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety for more information for Head Start staff and parents to help manage [stress](#) and support [social and emotional well-being](#).

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