

# HEALTHY MOUTH, HEALTHY SEX!

HOW YOUR ORAL HEALTH AFFECTS YOUR SEX LIFE  
BY DR. HELAINE SMITH



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Thank you to **David Meerman Scott**, who – although he doesn't know me – inspired me to “go viral” with this topic. You can learn more about David at his popular blog, [www.webinknow.com](http://www.webinknow.com).

**Official disclosure:** Although this e-book discusses medical and oral health conditions, in no way does it take the place of advice and care from your dental or medical professional.

You may post this e-book on your blog or email it to whomever you believe would benefit from reading it.

Thank you!

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## INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you thought about your teeth? That's like asking when you last thought about your femur or your elbow. Like breathing, teeth are an integral part of our bodies.

What many people don't understand – or even consider – is that the health of our teeth and mouths has a **huge connection** with our overall physical health – and our sex lives!

Think about it. Before you kiss someone for the first time, you make sure you have fresh breath. Before you have sex, you might even brush your teeth (especially in the morning – morning breath is pretty awful).

Yet something like chronic bad breath can bring your sex life to a crashing halt. Improperly fitted dentures can make kissing and other sexual activities very uncomfortable.

In this e-book, I'll explain the connection between your oral health and your sexual well-being – a topic not too many people talk about. You can find just about anything to do with sex on the Internet – but you won't find how taking care of your oral health can prolong your sexual health well into old age.

I give you the juice – from a medical perspective. I'm Dr. Helaine Smith, and this is a topic I'm passionate about.



## **ORAL HEALTH AND THE TEEN AND YOUNG ADULT YEARS**

### **STDs and Your Oral Health – What You Need to Know**

Sexually transmitted diseases are among the most common infections in the United States.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), an estimated 19 million new cases of STDs are reported each year in the U.S. – and nearly half the patients are **ages 15 – 24**. Despite prevention efforts, the U.S. has the highest rates of STDs in the industrialized world.

If you or your partner has any type of **sore or rash in or on the mouth**, then you'll definitely want to **use a condom or a dental dam** when performing oral sex. Now, I know you're most likely thinking, "Who in the hell wears a condom during oral sex?!" To be honest, probably not too many people – and this may be why the U.S. has such a high rate of STDs.

But the truth of the matter is, what looks like a "harmless" cold sore on your partner's mouth could very easily be HSV-1 oral herpes – a virus which, when transmitted, can reside on the genitalia as well. In fact, **there is no real difference between HSV-1, the "good" herpes, and HSV-2 the "bad" or genital herpes.** (As the Herpes.com Website puts it, one is socially acceptable, the other is not.)

Of even more concern in terms of transmittable diseases, research has shown that HPV – the virus that causes cervical cancer – is also being transferred at high rates due to oral sex. (You can read more on this in the next chapter.)

Hence, unless you've been in a long-term relationship with your partner, **it makes sense to wear a condom when practicing oral sex.**

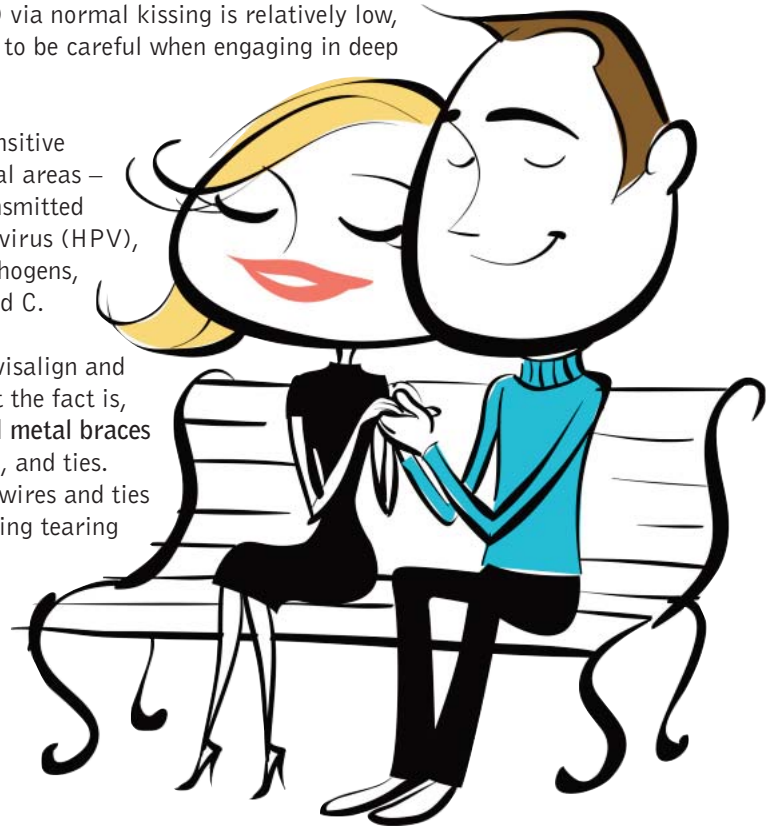
Although the risk of transferring an STD via normal kissing is relatively low, I do caution my **braces-wearing patients** to be careful when engaging in deep “French kissing” and oral sex.

This is because metal braces can tear sensitive mouth tissues and scratch delicate genital areas – increasing the potential for sexually transmitted diseases, including the human papillomavirus (HPV), HSV-1 oral herpes, and blood-borne pathogens, including HIV, AIDS, and hepatitis B and C.

Yes, new dental technologies, such as Invisalign and plastic braces, have been introduced, but the fact is, **many dentists still rely on the traditional metal braces** and their nickel titanium brackets, wires, and ties.

Even plastic braces still use metal wires and ties that can cause damage – including tearing condoms.

If you or your partner wears braces, it’s recommended you change the condom after each sexual activity – just in case.



## HEALTH FACT!

The CDC recommends that you **not engage** in sexual activities with partners who exhibit signs of STDs, including mouth or genital rashes, sores (including cold sores) or discharge. If you do decide to have sex with a partner exhibiting any of these symptoms, please use a condom – even during oral sex.

## Throat cancer – It's not just for old men anymore.

Many people are unaware of the importance of regular screening for oral cancer, and **young adults** especially may not realize that they could be at risk for a cancer that historically has affected older men and smokers. (Oral cancer is a catch-all term that includes cancers of the mouth, sinuses, and throat.)

According to the American Dental Association (ADA), oral cancer strikes over 34,000 Americans annually, and over 25% will die of the disease, which claims more lives than melanoma or cervical cancer. And, the ADA also notes, recent studies have shown a nearly five-fold increase in the incidence of oral cancer in individuals under age 40, many with no known risk factors.

### HEALTH FACT!

#### Throat cancer is a serious issue so pay attention:

According to the ViziLite Website, oral cancer treatment often results in disfiguring effects on patients, and can seriously compromise your quality of life – including your sex life.

Early detection and diagnosis can make a tremendous difference in life expectancy since oral cancer is 90% curable when found in its early stages. Unfortunately, **70% of oral cancers are diagnosed in the late stages**, III and IV, leading to a five-year survival rate of 57%.

One likely cause of this cancer? Researchers believe the human papillomavirus (HPV), long known to cause cervical cancer, is transmitted through oral sex.

Researchers at John Hopkins compared patients who had oral cancer with those who did not. The study revealed that those patients who had one to five oral sex partners **doubled their risk for throat cancer** and those with more than five increased their risk by 250%.

**This is higher than if you smoke!**

Even more worrisome, those with high numbers of partners increased their risk for the HPV-16 strain of the virus by 750%. Over 70% of cervical cancer cases are caused by HPV Types 16 and 18.

As a dentist, I am often my patients' first line of defense against oral cancer. This is because in addition to doing routine cleanings and fillings, I also check for signs of cancer in the mouth, on the tongue, and along the gums.

And, dentists can now use a new diagnostic tool, ViziLite Plus, to check for oral cancer. ViziLite Plus, which is FDA approved, is a chemiluminescent light source that helps detect potentially cancerous lesions, and is used in conjunction with a blue phenothiazine dye to mark the lesions.

**BOTTOM LINE:** If you have any type of persistent lesion, white or red patches, or spots in your mouth, visit your dentist immediately. If you notice any of these things on or in your partner's mouth, refrain from kissing and oral sex until he/she gets the A-OK from a dental professional.



## Smoking pot heightens sexual pleasure, but it does a real number on your gums.

According to *About.com: Sexuality*, lower doses of marijuana can “alter how you sense and perceive sexual stimuli in ways that enhance sex.” In one study, for example, 75% of men said that marijuana increased sexual pleasure and satisfaction while in another study 90% of women reported that “marijuana increased feelings of sexual pleasure and satisfaction to varying degrees.”

However, long-term use of pot can cause periodontal disease – concludes a study posted in the February 2008 *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA). I’ll spare you all the technical details, but basically, the researchers found that, “after controlling for tobacco smoking and other important confounders, regular exposure to cannabis smoke was strongly associated with the prevalence and incidence of periodontal attachment loss by age 32 years.”

**Translation: smoke pot on a regular basis, increase your risk for periodontal disease.**

“Big deal,” you’re thinking. “Why should I worry about periodontal disease?”

One of the most common chronic diseases in adults, periodontal disease, also known as gum disease, is a bacterial infection of your gums. **Left unchecked, the teeth become loose in the gums and eventually fall out.** And, it’s this oral bacteria that’s thought to cause a whole host of other health issues, including miscarriages and low birth-weight babies.

Read on, people, read on.



## ORAL HEALTH and the 30—, 40—, 50—SOMETHING YEARS

Thinking about having a baby? See your dentist first.

About a decade ago, the medical establishment began advocating that women take folic acid (or vitamin B9) while trying to get pregnant. At that point, studies had shown that women who took 400 micrograms (0.4 milligrams) of folic acid daily **before** getting pregnant and during the early months of their pregnancy reduced the risk – by up to 70% – of their babies being born with a serious neural tube defect involving incomplete development of the brain and spinal cord.

So what does this have to do with your oral health? Excellent question! Recent research has also shown that **poor oral hygiene can cause serious pregnancy complications** – including miscarriages, premature births, and low birth-weight babies.

Back in what I refer to as the “dark ages,” but which was really only some 20 odd years ago, the medical establishment believed that because the fetus was relatively isolated and protected in a sterile environment, few organisms could pass the placenta and harm the fetus – including oral bacteria from infections in the mouth.

However, in 2001 and again in 2002, researchers proved that these oral bacteria could indeed cross the placenta and cause serious harm. In fact, according to an article in *Scientific American*, **infections are thought to account for between 30 and 50 percent of all premature deliveries** – including gum infections such as gingivitis and periodontal disease.

You’re probably asking why and how oral infections can harm the growing fetus. It’s a great question – and the answer is fascinating.



## Periodontal disease can harm the growing fetus

As you probably already know, when a woman gets pregnant, her body is suffused with hormones. This increased level of hormonal activity exaggerates the way the gums react to irritants in plaque. This irritation causes what's known as "pregnancy gingivitis" – the build up of plaque on the teeth.

Gingivitis causes swelling, tenderness of the gums, and bleeding. If left untreated, gingivitis can become periodontal disease, a serious disease of the gums that can cause pregnancy complications.

According to the American Academy of Periodontology, pregnant women with periodontal disease may be **seven times more likely to deliver their babies prematurely or deliver babies that are too small**. These complications are thought to be caused by a labor-inducing chemical found in the oral bacteria – bacteria which can and do cross the placenta to the fetus.

Hence, just as you would take your folic acid before getting pregnant and during your first trimester, it's also **very important that you have a full dental exam before you get pregnant**. You want to make sure you don't have gingivitis or periodontal disease and get it treated if you do. Then, once you get pregnant, it's also important that you check back in with your dentist during the first and second trimesters when gingivitis is most likely to occur.

### HEALTH FACT!

If you've had multiple partners before getting married or settling down with one person, **consider being tested for HPV and throat cancer**. If your dentist does detect early stage throat cancer, he or she can treat it before you get pregnant.

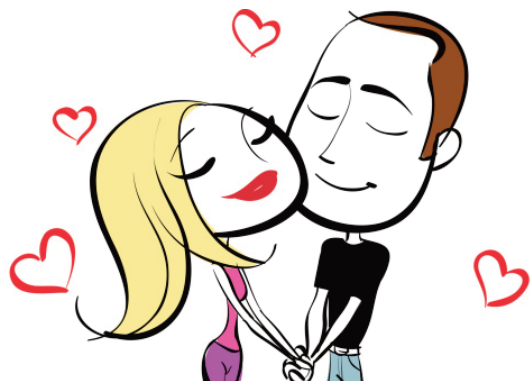
## Bad Breath: Why It Can Turn Your Sweet Kisses Sour.

Halitosis, otherwise known as “bad breath,” makes for humorous mouthwash or chewing gum commercials.

You ate something odoriferous, **such as onions**, and you don’t have to time to rush home before a date to brush your teeth? Forgot to brush your teeth while rushing out the door this morning and you’re worried “morning breath” will kill a major face-to-face meeting with a new client?

Simply use the advertised product and your breath will instantly become mint-y fresh.

Persistent bad breath, however, is much more difficult to deal with. **It can make you feel self-conscious and embarrassed** – especially when it comes to sex. If you’re constantly brushing your teeth or using mouthwash before close encounters, or if you worry that during sex your partner can smell your breath, **you’ll lose your spontaneity and joy**. Your sex life can begin to wane as you try product after product to eliminate the bad breath.



### Why we get bad breath

Our mouths are **full of bacteria** – 400 different kinds, to be exact – which live on food debris, plaque, and dead cells. (I know. Disgusting, isn’t it? But it’s true.) Brushing regularly removes this material and the bacteria, which is why it’s important to brush your teeth every day.

While you sleep, these bacteria **grow and thrive** because your mouth has been closed all night. This is why you wake up with “morning breath.” Simply brushing and using mouthwash will leave your mouth feeling clean and fresh – making you ready to snuggle with your partner.

In addition to certain foods and coffee, **you can get bad breath from medications**, such as sulfur compounds. These can leave you with breath that literally **smells like dead fish**. If this is the case, your dentist can prescribe special mouthwashes that help eliminate this smell.

And, some people simply produce an **excess of bacteria** – which go into overdrive in the mouth. No amount of brushing or over-the-counter mouthwashes eliminate the bad breath, which is why dentists now routinely prescribe chlorine dioxide rinses which have proven effective at killing the bacteria.

**Chronic bad breath is a serious health issue.**

In addition to making you feel self-conscious when it comes to kissing and having sex, persistent bad breath can indicate more serious health issues, including an **abscessed tooth, periodontal disease, liver problems, and diabetes**.

## HEALTH FACT!

According to WebMD, chronic bad breath can indicate the following: respiratory tract infections, chronic sinus infections, diabetes, chronic acid reflux, and liver or kidney problems. Don't ignore chronic bad breath or try to treat it with mouthwash. See your dentist ASAP if you think you have a problem.

I can't stress enough **how important it is that you visit your dentist if you have chronic bad breath** – and why you should not be embarrassed to do so. A dentist can determine the cause of your bad breath and prescribe the right treatment – and ensure your sex life returns to normal!

**Kiss on!**

## ORAL HEALTH AND THE ELDER AGE YEARS

### Don't let dry mouth dry up your sex life.

Although sexual activity may decline with age, many people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s (and older!) still enjoy wonderful and active sex lives. So it is with dismay that many of them experience a common condition that can significantly reduce and even put a stop to sex: Xerostomia.

Xerostomia is the medical name for a condition that is actually pretty common: dry mouth. This condition, which is the reduced or absent flow of saliva, affects nearly **25% of patients 65 years or older** and is most often caused by medication use, according to a 2003 article in the *Journal of the American Dental Association* (JADA). In fact, **over 400 medications are known to cause dry mouth**, a stat posted by the Oral Cancer Foundation.

In addition to making it hard to chew and swallow certain foods, such as crackers, Xerostomia can affect your dental and psychological health. Patients have reported problems with wearing dentures and studies have shown that Xerostomia increases the incidence of cavities, periodontal disease, bad breath, and cracking of your lips and oral tissues.

**In other words, dry mouth not only makes you feel miserable, it also puts a huge damper on your sex life. Dry mouth inhibits kissing and can make you feel self-conscious if you experience bad breath in addition to the dry mouth.**

Although you can find over-the-counter (OTC) saliva substitutes that help treat dry mouth, your best bet is to visit your dentist in order to determine the cause and the best course of action. Although dry mouth cannot be "cured," your dental professional can prescribe medication that will get the saliva glands working again. (This treatment, however, will not work for cancer patients whose glands have been exposed to radiation therapy).

Your dentist will also check for any early signs of cancer, red or white patches, sores, and other unusual symptoms of the mouth as well as ask you questions about your overall health in general.

#### HEALTH FACT!

Before taking a new medication – both prescribed and OTC – ask your doctor if one of the side effects is dry mouth. Medications known to cause dry mouth include high blood pressure, anti-depressants, diuretics, and antihistamines.

## Improve Your Sex Life with Dental Implants

Patients often complain about their dentures because they slip and move around – yet the **dental establishment has never really considered the effect of ill-fitting dentures on wearers' social activities** – including their sex lives.

A group of researchers set out to change that. In a 2005 study, which appeared in the Journal of Dentistry, researchers showed that dental implants dramatically improve one's sex life. Subjects in the clinical study received either "mandibular two-implant overdentures" or conventional dentures. Subjects were then surveyed for two months on the "looseness of their dentures when performing specific activities, **including kissing and sexual activities**, and the impact of the devices on these activities."

### HEALTH FACT!

If you elect to stay with your current dentures but feel self-conscious because they are loose, see your dentist. He or she can determine if the problem is due to how the fixture rests on your gums or if you have a bite problem (meaning, something is out of alignment). Both problems are easily fixed. Keeping your dentures clean will also help ensure they fit well on the gums.

The results? The study showed that "denture instability affects social and intimate activities." Subjects wearing the implant overdentures reported lower anxiety with regard to kissing and sexual activities when compared to subjects wearing conventional dentures.

In other words, if you wear conventional dentures, and your sex life is waning because **you feel uneasy wearing them during sexual activity**, then your response is normal – and, you may be a candidate for implant-supported dentures. With this technology, dental professionals install titanium posts into the jaw bone upon which the denture is attached – versus conventional dentures which sit on the gums and are held in place by OTC denture adhesives.

## General Facts about Oral Health and Sex

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention two other oral health issues as they relate to your sexual health.

TMJ disorders refer to the **Temporomandibular Joint** – or jaw joint – and surrounding muscles. These disorders can be quite painful and include migraines, neck and shoulder pain, and a host of other symptoms. In addition, TMJ problems can make it difficult to eat, swallow, yawn – and yes, engage in sexual activities. In fact, dentists will often tell patients with a TMJ flare-up to be careful to not open the mouth too wide or put the mouth through any type of vigorous activity, such as passionate kissing and oral sex.

TMJ problems can be difficult to diagnose, so if you think you have a problem, see your dental professional.

**Abusive relationships** also have a connection to one's oral health. How so? Women who are abused often **get hit in the face and mouth** – damaging teeth. (In fact, I'm a volunteer with the Give Back a Smile program which helps abused women regain their lives by fixing their smiles.)

If you're in an abusive relationship, please get help from one of the many agencies that exist. **You do not deserve to be beaten.** If you've been out of an abusive relationship for a year but have broken or missing teeth, please contact the Give Back a Smile Program at [www.aacd.com/foundation/gbasmission.asp](http://www.aacd.com/foundation/gbasmission.asp).





## Keep your body – and your sex life – healthy. Brush your teeth.

You've heard all your life that you should brush and floss your teeth every day and visit the dentist twice a year.

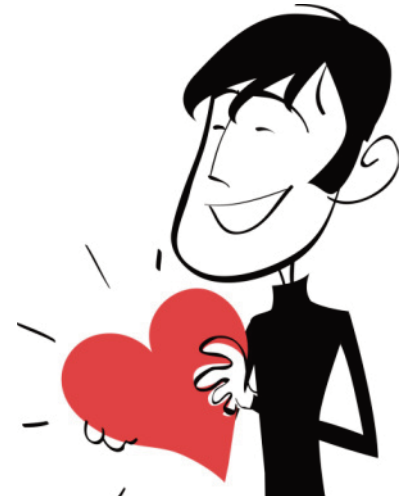
This advice is more important than ever, especially given the fact that researchers have discovered a link between periodontal disease and heart disease, diabetes, and other illnesses.

I hope the information in this e-book has been of help to you. I've long been an advocate of positive oral health as it relates to our sexual health – so I'm glad to see more research and articles in the mainstream press about it.

If you learn anything from this book, it should be this: **never be afraid to visit the dentist and don't let dental problems affect your sex life.**

Whether you have a sore, bad breath, or loose dentures, don't be afraid to explain the problem to your dentist. A good dentist will ask you about your life, your symptoms, and how they affect every day activities (including intimate activities such as kissing and sex).

If you feel you can't talk to your dentist about such personal issues (maybe he's older and isn't as up to date as he should be), consider finding a new dentist. Dental schools are now teaching dental students about how to treat the "whole" patient – not just the tooth! – and many dentists now continually update their skills with continuing education courses.



## Questions to Ask When Researching Dental Professionals

For whatever reason, you may need to find a new dentist – either you don't feel comfortable with the one you have or you haven't visited the dentist in years. When researching prospective dentists, you'll want to ask the following questions.

### Do you participate in continuing education courses?

When researching dentists, it pays to inquire about the professional's training – not only where he or she received his or her dental degree, but ongoing training as well. Ensure the dental professional is up-to-date on implants, sedation dentistry, implant-supported dentures, and a host of other technologies and services. At the very least, your dental professional should be taking one continuing education course a year. Most dentists will have these certificates hanging in their office. If you don't see anything, ask to see them.

### How long have you been practicing cosmetic dentistry?

If you're considering extensive cosmetic work, ask the dentist about his or her experience. Because any dental practitioner can take a seven-hour course to become "certified" in cosmetic dentistry, you'll want to inquire how long he or she has been practicing in cosmetic dentistry by ask how many practice hours he or she has, not "years." In order to become a Fellow in the Academy of General Dentistry, for example, a dentist must have 500 practice hours and have passed a comprehensive 400-question examination. To become AACD (American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry) accredited, a dentist must submit clinical cases for review plus pass rigorous written and oral examinations.

### Do you have references?

And finally, ask for references. "Before and after" photos on a Website are good, but they tell only one part of the story. Ask your dental professional for at least three references from people who have had cosmetic work done in the last 3-5 years -- which is enough time for any problems to occur relating to any work that was done.



## About Dr. Helaine Smith

Since graduating from dental school in 1991, **Dr. Helaine Smith** has been driven to provide the very best in dental care and advanced cosmetic dentistry procedures.

Not satisfied with providing general dentistry, Dr. Smith sought advanced dental training at the **Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies**. She is now one of two percent of dentists in the United States who provides full mouth reconstruction. In addition, Dr. Smith is a **Fellow in the Academy of General Dentistry** – an award granted to dentists who have more than 500 practice hours and have passed a comprehensive 400-question examination.

Her hard work and dedication to providing outstanding dental care resulted in Dr. Smith being named "First Runner Up" for the annual **Cosmetic Practice of the Year Award** competition in 2006. And, she's been twice voted Boston's Best Dentist by Community Newspapers' Readers Choice Awards.

Dr. Smith combines her drive for success with a desire to give back to the community. An active member of **Operation Smile** and **Cape CARES**, two groups that send volunteer dentists and physicians all over the world, Dr. Smith has been part of eleven volunteer missions to third world countries. She provides care to children with cleft lip and palate from remote mountain villages in numerous Latin American countries.

To book Dr. Smith to speak about dental marketing or dentistry, please contact her at [www.helainesmithdmd.com](http://www.helainesmithdmd.com). You can also check out her blog at [www.helainesmithdmd.blogspot.com](http://www.helainesmithdmd.blogspot.com).

## Subscribe to Dr. Smith's E-Newsletter

If you enjoyed this e-book, then you'll enjoy Dr. Smith's bi-monthly e-newsletter, "Successful Smiles."

Based on her real-life experience drawn from working with hundreds of Boston cosmetic dentistry patients over the last ten years, "Successful Smiles" is a cosmetic dentistry newsletter featuring lively articles about the transforming power of cosmetic dentistry and great dental care.

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