



## Ask Doctor

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# Oral health and HIV/Aids

Every year on December 1, the world observes World Aids Day, serving as a reminder of the ongoing fight against HIV/Aids and the importance of supporting those living with the virus. In addition to systemic health challenges, individuals living with HIV/Aids often face significant oral health issues due to a weakened immune system. Studies indicate that up to 80 percent of people with advanced HIV, particularly those with low CD4 counts, experience oral complications that can impact eating, speaking, and overall quality of life. Common oral conditions include:

**Candidiasis (thrush):** This condition presents as white patches on the tongue or inner cheeks caused by fungal overgrowth, often triggered by low immunity or certain medications.

**Periodontal disease:** Severe gum inflammation and bone loss are linked to atypical bacteria, including *Pseudomonas* and various species of *Candida*.

**Xerostomia and dental caries:** Reduced saliva production, whether due to HIV, antiretroviral therapy (ART), or lifestyle factors like smoking, increases the risk of tooth decay.

**Ulcers and oral lesions:** Painful sores can lead to changes in taste, malnutrition, and tooth mobility.

These oral conditions often indicate a decline in immune system function but can respond well to timely, integrated care.

### Essential care strategies

Maintaining oral health is crucial for individuals living with HIV. It is recommended to brush at least twice daily with fluoride toothpaste, floss regularly, and use antibacterial mouthwash to combat plaque and infection.

Staying hydrated, chewing sugar-free gum, strictly adhering to ART, and avoiding tobacco, sugary foods, and alcohol can also help. Routine dental visits for cleanings, fluoride treatments, and early intervention are vital, and it is essential to inform dental professionals about all medications being taken.

### Breaking the stigma

Fear of stigma often prevents people with HIV/Aids from seeking dental care, which can exacerbate health issues. Dentists and healthcare providers must create welcoming and judgement-free environments. Let us commit to supporting individuals living with HIV/Aids, recognising that oral health is a human right for everyone. Providing care without discrimination can significantly improve both health and dignity.

