

Drug Use and Your Mouth

Chronic illicit drug use affects oral health.



When you think of the harm caused by illegal drugs—heart, stomach, brain—do you also think of your teeth and gums? Both the habits of drug users and the drugs themselves wreak havoc on the mouth.

For example, people addicted to opioids or amphetamines usually focus on obtaining and using drugs. Their addiction may cause them to neglect important health routines. Oral hygiene suffers, as does their diet. Sugary foods and drinks are an easy hunger fix.¹

This is one of the reasons that drug users have a higher rate of tooth decay and gum disease than the general public. Another reason is they are not as likely to visit the dentist.²

How Drugs Harm Your Teeth

Neglect isn't the only side effect of illicit or addictive drug use. Here are a few other effects that drugs can have on the mouth:¹

- Dry mouth
- Indigestion or acid reflux
- Grinding teeth
- Reduced blood to gums and tooth roots
- Ulcers or sores

Get help

If you or someone you know suffers from addiction, oral health isn't the only danger. Though these substances can lead to lasting harm to the mouth, they can also lead to other physical and mental health issues.

In Maryland, you can get help with a substance use disorder by dialing the Crisis Helpline. Simply dial 211 from any phone. Then, press 1.

You can also ask your dentist or primary care physician where to go for help with addiction.

Some drugs do more direct damage. Here are a few common drugs and the specific ways they cause harm: ¹

Cocaine can:

- Break down enamel when touched to teeth
- Cause mouth sores when rubbed on gums
- Damage palate when snorted
- Cause tooth grinding
- Cause jaw spasms

Amphetamines (club drugs like ecstasy, molly, etc.) can:

- Crack teeth
- Damage the jaw
- Dry the mouth

Methamphetamine (meth) can:

- Rot teeth quickly
- Cause tooth grinding
- Dry the mouth
- Cause severe sugar cravings
- Cause tooth loss

Alcohol abuse can:

- Cause faster plaque buildup
- Lead to quicker tooth decay
- Cause reflux, causing tooth harm with acids

Opioid and opiate abuse can:

- Cause sugar cravings, which may lead to decay
- Cause tooth grinding
- Increase risk of viruses and infections
- Increase risk of oral fungus (yeast)
- Mask signs of pain

Marijuana and tobacco can:

- Lead to oral or throat cancer
- Cause gum disease
- Cause dry mouth

1 <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/health-complications-addiction/dental-health>, September 2019.

2 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/03/170316093016.htm>, March 2017.

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