

Why Older Adults Face More Root Cavities — and How to Prevent Them

By JoD Later Life · 7 min read

Many people assume cavities are mostly a childhood problem — something you grow out of once the sweets slow down. In later life, though, a different kind of decay becomes more common: the root cavity. It forms not on the hard enamel crown of the tooth but lower down, on the softer root surface that can become exposed with age. Understanding why this happens is the first step to heading it off.

This is a general guide for older adults and the people who care for them. It is not a diagnosis, and no article can tell you what is happening in your own mouth. Only an in-person dental examination can do that.

What a root cavity is, and why it differs from the ones you remember

The crown of a tooth — the part you see when you smile — is covered in enamel, the hardest tissue in the body. The root, normally tucked below the gumline, has no enamel. It is covered instead by a thinner, softer layer called cementum, with dentine beneath. When a root surface is exposed to the mouth, it is more vulnerable to decay than enamel, and cavities can start there more readily and spread more quickly.

Dentists call this root caries. It tends to appear near the gumline, sometimes as a soft, discoloured patch that is easy to overlook because it does not always hurt in the early stages.

Why age tips the odds toward root decay

Several changes that are common later in life line up to make root surfaces both more exposed and more exposed to risk.

Receding gums expose the root

Over the years, gum tissue can recede, drawing back from the tooth and leaving part of the root uncovered. Recession has many causes, including a history of gum disease and, sometimes, years

of brushing too hard. Whatever the cause, the result is the same: root surface that was once protected is now out in the open, where plaque can settle on it.

A drier mouth means less natural protection

Saliva does quiet, constant work — rinsing away food, buffering acids, and helping to restore minerals to tooth surfaces. Many older adults have less of it. The usual culprit is not age itself but medication: a long list of common prescriptions can reduce saliva flow as a side effect, and taking several of them at once can compound the effect. A dry mouth (xerostomia) leaves teeth, and especially exposed roots, with less of their natural defence.

Dexterity, habits, and plaque

Arthritis, reduced grip strength, or simply reaching awkward areas can make thorough cleaning harder. Where plaque lingers — often right at the gumline — is exactly where root cavities like to start. Gum recession and periodontal changes are closely linked, so keeping up with [periodontal and gum care](#) is part of protecting the root surfaces those gums once covered.

Practical ways to lower the risk

The encouraging part is that the same handful of measures work together, and most are simple to fold into a daily routine.

- **Use a fluoride toothpaste, and ask about a higher-strength option.** Fluoride helps harden tooth surfaces against acid. For adults at higher risk of root decay, a dentist may recommend a prescription-strength fluoride toothpaste or an in-office fluoride application. Whether that fits your situation is a conversation to have at a visit.
- **Clean gently but thoroughly at the gumline.** A soft-bristled brush — or an electric brush, which can be easier to hold — helps reach the area where roots are exposed without scrubbing the surface away.
- **Keep cleaning between the teeth.** Floss, interdental brushes, or floss holders all help. If dexterity is a problem, a holder or an interdental brush with a larger handle can make the difference between doing it and giving up.
- **Tackle a dry mouth.** Sip water through the day, and ask your dentist or physician about saliva substitutes or other measures if dryness is persistent. Do not stop a prescribed medication on your own; raise it with the prescriber.
- **Be mindful of frequent sugary or acidic sips.** Hard candies, sweetened tea, and sipping sugary drinks over hours all extend the time teeth spend under acid attack.

Why regular checkups matter even more here

Root cavities are often painless until they are well advanced, and they can hide at the gumline or between teeth where you cannot see them. A dentist or hygienist can spot early changes, feel for softened root surfaces, and catch decay while it is still small and more straightforward to manage. If it has been a while since your last visit, that is common and nothing to be sheepish about — the point is simply to get an assessment.

Caught early, a root cavity can sometimes be managed with fluoride and closer monitoring, or treated with a relatively small restoration. Left to grow, it can undermine a tooth near the gumline, which is harder to deal with. As always, what is right in a given case depends on an examination.

Frequently asked questions

Why do older adults get cavities on the roots of their teeth?

Two things usually combine. Gums recede over time and expose the root, which is softer than enamel and more prone to decay. At the same time, many older adults have a drier mouth — often from medication — which reduces saliva's natural protection. Add any difficulty cleaning thoroughly, and plaque at the gumline can start a cavity on that exposed root surface.

Can a root cavity be prevented once my gums have receded?

Receded gums generally do not grow back on their own, but the exposed root can still be protected. Fluoride, careful cleaning at the gumline, managing a dry mouth, and regular checkups all help lower the risk. A dentist can tell you which measures make the most sense in your particular case.

Does a dry mouth really affect cavities that much?

Saliva helps rinse the mouth, neutralize acid, and return minerals to tooth surfaces, so having less of it removes part of your natural defence. That is why a persistently dry mouth is worth raising with your dentist and the doctor who manages your medications, rather than simply living with it.

Sources & further reading

- [Canadian Dental Association — Your Oral Health](#) — guidance on decay, gum health, and caring for your teeth.
- [Ontario Dental Association — Your Oral Health](#) — patient information for Ontario residents.

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