How Smoking Affects Your Oral Health | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/how-does-smoking-affect-your-oral-health/

Details:

Smoking harms more than your lungs and heart. It stains teeth, reduces saliva, increases the risk of tooth decay and gum disease, slows healing after dental treatment and raises the risk of oral cancer. Smokers can also have an increased chance of complications such as dry socket after an extraction and problems with dental implants. At Core Dental we do not judge. We check your teeth, gums and mouth, screen for early warning signs, and can point you to support if you decide to quit.

How does smoking stain teeth?

Chemicals in tobacco, particularly nicotine and tar, can cause teeth to turn yellow over time, and in some people the staining becomes brown or even black. Brushing twice a day can help limit some surface staining, but deeper stains usually need a professional clean to remove. Our dental hygiene visits can help with surface stains, and if you would like a lighter shade, we can talk about teeth whitening once your gums are healthy.

Why do smokers have more tooth decay?

Nicotine reduces the amount of saliva in your mouth. Saliva normally washes away food and neutralises acids, so when there is less of it, teeth are more exposed to decay. Smokers are therefore more likely to get cavities and often complain of a dry mouth. Brushing with fluoride toothpaste, flossing daily, drinking water and having regular check-ups can help protect your teeth.

How does smoking affect your gums?

Smoking is one of the main risk factors for gum disease. People who smoke are considerably more likely to develop gum disease than non-smokers, and the risk tends to rise with the number of cigarettes smoked and the length of time a person has smoked.

Smoking also masks the warning signs. Because it affects blood flow to the gums, smokers may notice less bleeding, so gum disease can progress without obvious symptoms. Left untreated, gum disease can lead to loose teeth and tooth loss. Read more about why people suffer from gum disease and what gum disease treatment involves .

How does smoking delay healing?

People who smoke face an increased risk of complications after certain dental work.

Dry socket. After a tooth is extracted, a blood clot normally forms in the socket and protects it while it heals. In smokers the clot is more likely to be lost or fail to form, leaving the socket painful and slow to heal. This is called dry socket.

Slow-healing sores. Ulcers and sores in the mouth can take a long time to heal, because nicotine reduces blood flow and also affects how well your immune system can heal tissue and fight infection.

Dental implants. Dental implants have an increased risk of failing in people who smoke, because healing around the implant is affected. See our article on whether smoking affects dental implants .

If you are planning an extraction, gum treatment or implants, please tell us if you smoke so we can plan and give you advice on aftercare. Even pausing smoking around the time of treatment may help healing, and your dentist or doctor can talk to you about this.

How does smoking affect the risk of oral cancer?

Oral cancer can develop in areas of the mouth such as the cheeks, palate, tongue, floor of the mouth and lips. Smoking is a major risk factor. This is why regular dental check-ups matter: as well as checking your teeth, your dentist screens your mouth for early signs of oral cancer, and finding changes early helps people have them assessed and treated promptly. Our article on what you need to know about mouth cancer has more detail.

What are the signs of oral cancer?

Oral cancer can occur in any part of the mouth, but common spots include the sides of the tongue and the floor of the mouth. See your dentist or doctor promptly if you notice any of the following:

an ulcer that does not heal within three weeks

a red or white patch in your mouth

a swelling or lump in your mouth

These signs do not always mean cancer, but they should always be checked.

How can you quit smoking?

A good first step is to talk to your doctor or dentist. They can discuss options such as counselling, nicotine replacement and prescription medicines. You can also call Quitline on 13 7848 (13 QUIT) for free, confidential advice. Quitting can be hard, and many people need more than one attempt. Every smoke-free day supports your teeth, gums and general health.

How do we support smokers at Core Dental?

We want you to feel comfortable talking about smoking so that we can look after your mouth properly. We can explain how smoking affects your treatment options, schedule regular check-ups and hygiene visits, and screen for early changes. We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans for eligible treatment.

Vaping is in the same advice, for a stated reason

The published Victorian advice on smoking and oral health treats vaping alongside it, and explains exactly why — including a mechanism that is specific to vaping and not to cigarettes.

Why they are grouped. The Victorian Department of Health: "Vaping is used recreationally and therapeutically as an alternative to smoking. Due to the source of intake, the oral health effects are similar to those of smoking."

What is in the vapour, even in a nicotine-free product. "When you vape, you inhale e-liquids (also called vaping juice) which, even when labelled 'nicotine-free', can contain harmful substances." Those listed are "Nicotine"; "Heavy metals"; "Volatile organic compounds (VOCs)"; "Cancer-causing chemicals."

And: "The risk of vaping devices causing problems in your mouth is much higher if they contain nicotine."

The Department is honest about the state of the evidence. "The long-term effects of vaping are not fully known. There is significant emerging evidence of the impact of vaping on oral tissues."

And the main oral effect it does identify, with a chemical mechanism. "The main one is xerostomia or dry mouth which leads to taste changes as well as increased risk of tooth decay, tooth erosion (acid damage), tooth sensitivity, and gum disease. This is primarily due to the propylene glycol (PG) and vegetable glycerine (VG) vapourising into acidic compounds that cause teeth to dissolve or erode. When the vapor combines with the added sweetened flavourings they can create a sticky residue that sticks to teeth increasing the risk of tooth decay."

A sticky residue plus acid plus a dry mouth. That is a different route to the same damage, and it is worth knowing for anyone who switched to vaping believing their teeth were out of it. The Department adds: "The additives in vaping liquids can also cause discolouration on teeth."

One further caution. "Vaping may be seen as a way to quit smoking. Yet vaping may make it harder to quit smoking completely which increases the risk of diseases associated with tobacco use, such as mouth cancer."

The full list of problems, applying to both. "Gum (or periodontal) disease"; "Mouth cancer"; "Whitening of the soft tissue in the mouth (called smoker's keratosis)"; "Poor healing after tooth removal (known as dry socket)"; "Tooth decay"; "Tooth loss"; "Poor healing after mouth and gum surgery"; "Xerostromia (dry mouth)"; "Altered taste sensations"; "Bad taste in the mouth and bad breath (called halitosis)"; "Tooth erosion (acid damage to the teeth)"; "Tooth discolouration"; "Aphthous ulcers."

And tell your dentist. "If you vape, make sure to tell your dentist this."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Effects of smoking and vaping on oral health, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 24 September 2025). Accessed 6 November 2026.

The gum mechanism, and the good news about stopping

The most consequential effect is on the gums, and the published explanation of why is specific enough to be useful. So is the published statement about what happens if you stop.

The mechanism. "Vaping and smoking alters the blood supply to the gums, preventing the body's immune system from fighting the bacteria that are present in the plaque on teeth. This makes the gum disease progress faster and less likely to respond well to treatment."

Faster, and less responsive to treatment. Both halves matter — it is not only that disease is more likely, but that treating it works less well.

And it is dose-related. "The risk of gum disease is higher with the level of nicotine consumed while smoking and vaping. The risk of developing severe infections associated with gum disease also increases, leading to a bad taste and a bad smell from your mouth as well as pain."

What gum disease does. "Gum disease (also called periodontal disease) is caused by an infection that destroys the bone surrounding and supporting your teeth." At the advanced stage, "that irritation starts to damage the structures that hold the tooth to the gum. Teeth may become loose, fall out by themselves, or a dentist may have to remove them."

Why losing teeth matters beyond appearance. "Losing teeth towards the back of your mouth can create problems with chewing food. Losing teeth at the front of the mouth affects your ability to eat, your appearance, and can create problems with speech. Teeth also play an important part in holding the shape of the lower part of the face."

Now the good news, in the Department's own words. "Will my gums get better if I stop vaping/smoking? Yes. The good news is that people who quit smoking or vaping have the same risk of developing gum disease and responding to gum treatment as non-smokers."

The same risk as non-smokers. That is a complete return to baseline on this particular measure, and it is the strongest argument on the page.

One thing to expect after quitting, so it does not alarm you. "Once you quit smoking, do not be alarmed if your gums bleed more. Seek treatment from a dentist or dental hygienist. They can also show you how to care for your teeth at home."

Bleeding gums after quitting are described in the published advice as expected rather than a setback — the blood supply the smoking suppressed is returning.

The symptoms to watch for. "Red, swollen, tender, bleeding gums"; "Discharge (pus) coming from your gums"; "Gums that are loose and pull away from your teeth"; "A bad taste or bad breath"; "Loose teeth. This can change the feel of your bite when your teeth are placed together or make dentures fit differently"; "Spaces opening between your teeth."

Healing after treatment. "Nicotine use makes it harder for the immune system to fight infections. This slows down healing after tooth removal or injuries in the mouth." Which is also why the Department's wisdom tooth advice includes "don't smoke for 48 hours after the surgery", and why smoking is named among the groups at greater risk of a dental implant failing to fuse with the bone.

On mouth cancer. The Department's cancer page states that "tobacco and alcohol are responsible for over 75% of mouth cancers", that "if you smoke or chew tobacco or 'paan' (betel quid preparation), you are twice as likely to develop mouth cancer than a non-smoker", and that "mouth cancer is six times more common in alcohol drinkers than in non-drinkers".

And the check-up point. "It is very important for people who smoke to visit their dentist regularly to keep their teeth and gums healthy and check for signs of mouth cancer." Its advice on quitting is to "speak to your doctor or dentist about quitting vaping and smoking", and it points to Quitline for help.

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Effects of smoking and vaping on oral health, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 24 September 2025); Mouth cancer, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 September 2025); Wisdom teeth, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (the page states its review date as 3 June 2022); Cosmetic dentistry and teeth whitening, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 12 December 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Does smoking cause bad breath?

Smoking can contribute to bad breath, and it can also dry the mouth and affect the gums, which may make breath problems worse. A dental check and clean, along with good home care, can help.

Can I have dental implants if I smoke?

Smoking increases the risk that an implant will not heal well or may fail. Whether implants suit you is a decision for you and your dentist after an examination, and we will explain the risks clearly.

What is dry socket?

Dry socket happens when the blood clot in a tooth socket is lost or does not form, leaving the socket painful and slow to heal. Smoking increases the risk, so please follow your aftercare instructions.

How often should smokers have a dental check-up?

Your dentist will recommend a schedule based on your oral health, but many smokers benefit from regular check-ups because they include screening for gum disease and early signs of oral cancer.

Where can I get help to quit smoking?

Talk to your doctor or dentist, or call Quitline on 13 7848 (13 QUIT). They can discuss counselling, nicotine replacement and other options to support you.

Is vaping better for my mouth than smoking?

Not on the published account. The Victorian Department of Health: "Due to the source of intake, the oral health effects are similar to those of smoking." And: "The risk of vaping devices causing problems in your mouth is much higher if they contain nicotine."

Is nicotine-free vaping harmless?

No. "When you vape, you inhale e-liquids (also called vaping juice) which, even when labelled 'nicotine-free', can contain harmful substances", including "heavy metals", "volatile organic compounds (VOCs)" and "cancer-causing chemicals".

How does vaping damage teeth specifically?

Through dryness, acid and residue. The main effect is "xerostomia or dry mouth which leads to taste changes as well as increased risk of tooth decay, tooth erosion (acid damage), tooth sensitivity, and gum disease", "primarily due to the propylene glycol (PG) and vegetable glycerine (VG) vapourising into acidic compounds that cause teeth to dissolve or erode". The sweetened flavourings "can create a sticky residue that sticks to teeth increasing the risk of tooth decay".

Why does smoking make gum disease worse?

It interferes with your immune response. "Vaping and smoking alters the blood supply to the gums, preventing the body's immune system from fighting the bacteria that are present in the plaque on teeth. This makes the gum disease progress faster and less likely to respond well to treatment."

Is the risk dose-related?

Yes. "The risk of gum disease is higher with the level of nicotine consumed while smoking and vaping."

Will my gums recover if I stop?

The Department's answer is unusually direct: "Yes. The good news is that people who quit smoking or vaping have the same risk of developing gum disease and responding to gum treatment as non-smokers."

My gums bled more after I quit. Is that bad?

The Department expects it: "Once you quit smoking, do not be alarmed if your gums bleed more. Seek treatment from a dentist or dental hygienist."

What oral problems are most common in people who smoke or vape?

"Gum (or periodontal) disease"; "Mouth cancer"; "Whitening of the soft tissue in the mouth (called smoker's keratosis)"; "Poor healing after tooth removal (known as dry socket)"; "Tooth decay"; "Tooth loss"; "Poor healing after mouth and gum surgery"; "Xerostromia (dry mouth)"; "Altered taste sensations"; "Bad taste in the mouth and bad breath (called halitosis)"; "Tooth erosion (acid damage to the teeth)"; "Tooth discolouration"; "Aphthous ulcers."

What gum symptoms should I watch for?

"Red, swollen, tender, bleeding gums"; "Discharge (pus) coming from your gums"; "Gums that are loose and pull away from your teeth"; "A bad taste or bad breath"; "Loose teeth"; "Spaces opening between your teeth."

Does smoking affect healing after dental work?

Yes. "Nicotine use makes it harder for the immune system to fight infections. This slows down healing after tooth removal or injuries in the mouth." The Department's wisdom tooth advice is "don't smoke for 48 hours after the surgery", and smoking is named among the groups at greater risk of an implant not fusing with the bone.

How much does smoking raise my mouth cancer risk?

"If you smoke or chew tobacco or 'paan' (betel quid preparation), you are twice as likely to develop mouth cancer than a non-smoker", and "tobacco and alcohol are responsible for over 75% of mouth cancers".

Should I tell my dentist I vape?

Yes — the Department says so plainly: "If you vape, make sure to tell your dentist this." It also advises you to "speak to your doctor or dentist about quitting vaping and smoking", and points to Quitline for help.

Related services and further reading

Dental check-ups

Dental hygiene

Does smoking affect dental implants?

Everything you may need to know about mouth cancer

How does diabetes affect your oral health?

Why do people suffer from gum disease?

What does treatment of gum disease involve?

Are women more prone to oral health problems?

Teeth whitening

Periodontics

How can we help?

If you smoke or have recently quit, our team can check your teeth, gums and mouth at any of our nine Core Dental clinics. Call 13 13 16 or book online. We will explain what we find and your options in plain language, quote before treatment starts, and talk you through interest-free payment plans for eligible treatment.

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week, with Monday to Friday hours to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online at coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday mornings, Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is general in nature and is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

What oral health problems does smoking cause?

Smoking is linked with stained teeth, dry mouth, tooth decay, gum disease, slow healing and oral cancer. Core Dental dentists check for these during your examination and explain what we find.

Why do smokers get yellow or brown teeth?

Nicotine and tar in tobacco stain teeth yellow and can cause brown or black discolouration over time. Core Dental hygiene visits can remove surface stains, though deeper staining may need further treatment.

How does nicotine lead to tooth decay?

Nicotine reduces saliva, which normally helps protect teeth, so decay and dry mouth are more likely. Core Dental dentists suggest fluoride toothpaste, daily flossing and regular check-ups.

Does smoking increase the risk of gum disease?

Yes. Smokers have a considerably increased risk of gum disease, which tends to rise with the number of cigarettes smoked. Core Dental dentists check your gums and can treat or refer gum disease.

Does smoking affect healing after tooth extraction?

Yes. Smoking raises the risk of dry socket and slows healing of mouth sores and ulcers. Core Dental dentists give aftercare advice and explain how smoking can affect your recovery.

What mouth changes should smokers have checked promptly?

See a dentist or doctor promptly for an ulcer that has not healed within three weeks, a red or white patch, or a swelling in the mouth. Core Dental dentists screen for early signs during check-ups.

Who can help me stop smoking?

Your doctor, your dentist and Quitline on 13 7848 (13 QUIT) can all offer support. Core Dental dentists can discuss how quitting helps your teeth and gums and point you to further help.

How do I book a dental check at Core Dental?

Call 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au for any of our nine clinics. Tell our team if you smoke so we can plan your examination and any screening.