

The connection between your oral and overall health



We'll do whatever it takes and then some.

Regular dental checkups may tell dentists about your overall health

Although seeing a dentist is no substitute for a visit to a physician, regular dental checkups can reveal much about your overall health. If a dentist finds a potential health issue, he or she can refer you to a physician for follow-up.

More than 120 medical conditions, some of them life-threatening, can be detected in the early stages by a dentist. It is well documented that a high percentage of health conditions can have oral symptoms such as swollen or bleeding gums, ulcers, dry mouth, bad breath, metallic taste and various other changes in the oral cavity.

Scientific American, for example, reports that current research indicates a relationship between oral and overall (systemic) health. "Systemic" refers to the involvement of many organs or systems of the whole body.

Learn more about the connection between some specific health conditions and oral health and what you can do to promote good oral health for you and your family.

Heart Disease

Studies have shown that people with moderate or advanced gum (periodontal) disease are more likely to have cardiovascular disease (CVD) or heart disease than those with healthy gums. However, studies have not established that either heart disease or gum disease actually causes the other. This is a difficult task because many of the risk factors for gum disease are the same as those for heart disease. Heart disease disproportionately affects males and people of low income status as well as those who smoke, have a poor diet or have diabetes.

Although gum disease seems to be associated with heart disease, more studies are needed before we can say with certainty what the relationship is. Research has not shown that treatment for one of these diseases will help control the other, but we do know that regular dental checkups, professional cleanings and good oral hygiene practices can improve oral health and that good oral health contributes to good overall health.

What can you do?

While regular dental exams and cleanings are necessary to remove bacteria, plaque and tartar and to detect early signs of gum disease, you can play a major role in preventing gum disease:

- Brush for two to three minutes, twice a day, with fluoridated toothpaste. Be sure to brush along the gumline.
- Floss daily to remove plaque from places your toothbrush can't reach.
- Eat a healthy diet to provide essential nutrients (vitamins A and C, in particular).
- Avoid cigarettes and smokeless tobacco.
- Carefully follow your physician's and dentist's instructions about health care, including using prescription medications, such as antibiotics, as directed.

Diabetes

Studies show that people with diabetes are more susceptible to the development of gum (periodontal) disease and other oral health problems than those without diabetes. In addition, research shows that people with diabetes also have more tooth loss. Why? Diabetes can slow the healing process and lower resistance to infections, including oral infections.

Although scientific evidence shows that the state of your oral health is connected to diabetes and diabetic complications, more studies are needed before we can say with certainty what the relationship is. However, we do know that regular dental checkups, professional cleanings and good oral hygiene practices can improve oral health and that good oral health contributes to good overall health.

What can you do?

Maintenance of good oral health through regular dental visits and appropriate treatment of gum problems is critical for people with diabetes. While regular dental exams and cleanings are necessary to remove bacteria, plaque and tartar and to detect early signs of oral disease, you can play a major role in preventing gum disease and tooth decay.

- Brush for two to three minutes, twice a day, with fluoridated toothpaste. Be sure to brush along the gumline.
- Floss daily to remove plaque from places your toothbrush can't reach.
- Eat a healthy diet to provide essential nutrients (vitamins A and C, in particular).
- Treat dental infections immediately.
- Make sure your dentist knows you have diabetes and share your complete medical history, including any medications you are currently taking.
- Carefully follow your physician's and dentist's instructions about health care, and reduce or eliminate sugars and starches from your diet.

Cancer

Your dentist should screen for oral cancer and other cancers of the head and neck, including skin cancer, cancer of the jaw bone and thyroid cancer, during routine checkups. He or she feels for lumps or irregular tissue changes in your neck, head, cheeks and oral cavity, and thoroughly examines the soft tissues in your mouth, specifically looking for any sores or discolored tissues. Survival rates greatly increase the earlier oral cancer is discovered and treated. During your next dental visit, ask your dentist to do an oral cancer screening. See your dentist immediately if you observe:

- any sore that persists longer than two weeks;
- a swelling, growth or lump anywhere in or around the mouth or neck;
- white or red patches in the mouth or on the lips;
- repeated bleeding from the mouth or throat; or
- difficulty swallowing or persistent hoarseness.

What can you do?

Scientists aren't sure of the exact cause of oral cancer. However, the carcinogens in tobacco products, alcohol and certain foods, as well as excessive exposure to the sun, have been found to increase the risk of developing oral cancer. Risk factors for oral cancer may also be genetically inherited.

You can help prevent oral cancer by:

- Not smoking or using spit tobacco
- Limiting your alcohol intake
- Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables

Also, periodic self-examinations can increase your chances of detecting oral cancer, so be sure to examine your face, cheeks, jaw and neck regularly for any changes or lumps.

Tobacco Use

While most people are aware of the impact tobacco use has on their overall health, some might not consider its effects on oral health, including:

- Increased risk of mouth pain, cavities and gum recession (which can lead to tooth loss)
- Reduced ability to fight infection, including in the mouth and gums
- Slower healing of gum tissue after oral surgery or from injury
- Increased risk of tooth loss (twice that of non-smokers)
- Increased risk of needing root canal treatment (twice that of non-smokers)
- Increased risk of gum (periodontal) disease (50 percent more cases than non-smokers)
- Reduced effectiveness of gum disease treatments
- Children exposed to tobacco smoke may have delays in the formation of their permanent teeth.

What can you do?

If you are a smoker or a parent with a child or teen who you suspect may be using tobacco, you can start by understanding that tobacco dependence is a nicotine addiction disorder with physical, sensory, psychological and behavioral aspects that need to be addressed in order to break the habit.

To help you kick the habit, your dentist or physician may prescribe a variety of nicotine replacement therapies, such as a transdermal nicotine patch or chewing gum.

All parents, even those who do not use tobacco, should educate themselves and their children about the dangers of smoking.

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Pregnancy

During pregnancy, hormonal changes may increase the risk of gingivitis, or inflammation of the gums. Symptoms include tenderness, swelling and bleeding of the gums. Without proper care, these problems may become more serious and can lead to gum (periodontal) disease. If you notice any changes in your mouth during pregnancy, see your dentist.

Some recent research suggests a link between gum disease and pre-term, low-birth weight babies. However, other studies indicate that treatment of gum disease does not significantly alter gestational term or birth weight. Though findings are inconclusive and further research is needed, we do know preventive dental care during pregnancy improves both oral and overall health and is safe for both mother and child.

What can you do?

- Brush twice daily and floss at least once a day — these basic oral health practices will help reduce plaque buildup and keep your mouth healthy.
- Call your dentist to make an appointment to have your teeth professionally cleaned. Your dentist will also assess your oral health and map out a dental plan for the rest of your pregnancy.
- The American Dental Association recommends avoiding routine or elective x-rays during pregnancy.
- What you eat during your pregnancy affects the development of your unborn child — including your baby's teeth — so it's important to eat nutritious, well-balanced meals and make nutritious food choices, such as fresh fruits, raw vegetables and dairy products.

Take control of your oral health

Visiting a dentist regularly can help you maintain your oral health. A dentist's exam may detect poor nutrition and hygiene, as well as provide clues to your overall well-being.

It is important for you and your family to provide your dentist with complete medical and dental histories and to inform your dentist of any recent health developments, including the use of over-the-counter medications and diet supplements, even if they seem unrelated to oral health. Some health conditions may affect how dental care is provided.

You can also educate yourself about the relationship between oral and overall health by subscribing to our e-newsletter, *Dental Wire*, (see sidebar) or visiting the oral health section of our website.