

Take Care of Your Mouth, Take Care of Your Health

Your mouth can indicate the state of your health at distant sites. Mounting evidence suggests that oral health is linked to cardiovascular, reproductive, skeletal and metabolic wellness. Your dentist may be the first to spot the warning signs of problems elsewhere in your body.

It makes sense that the health of a large organ such as the mouth, with its inner cheeks, tongue and 32 teeth, can have an impact on general health.

The Cardiovascular Connection

Although much more research is required to confirm the link to heart disease, scientists think that inflammatory proteins produced by bacteria in inflamed gums could enter the bloodstream and contribute to swelling and narrowing of the coronary blood vessels. Another line of thought is that oral bacteria can attach to fatty plaques in the coronary arteries and contribute to clot formation, which obstructs normal blood flow to the heart and sets the stage for heart attacks and strokes.

Research has found that people with periodontitis (serious gum disease that can erode the bone and structures supporting the teeth) are almost twice as likely to suffer from atherosclerosis and coronary artery disease as those without periodontal disease. Periodontal disease may also exacerbate existing heart conditions.

Reproductive health

Maternal periodontal disease has been linked to pre-eclampsia, a serious condition that includes elevated blood pressure in pregnant women. According to Health Canada, moms-to-be with gingivitis (inflamed gums) or periodontitis are at increased risk of delivering premature or low-birth-weight babies because of oral bacteria that can invade the placenta and amniotic fluid. The Journal of Dental Research reported that women with inflammatory gum disease are more likely to develop gestational diabetes, possibly because inflammation can impair blood glucose control.

In pregnancy, high hormone levels increase blood flow to the gums. This can make the gums more sensitive and over-reactive to dental plaque and oral bacteria. The gums may bleed more easily, and a woman may develop a tiny pregnancy 'tumor' at the point where the gum starts to swell.

So if you're planning to have a child, making sure your teeth and gums are healthy should be part of your pre-pregnancy plan — along with eating healthy and quitting smoking.

The best option is to have a thorough check up, a good cleaning and any necessary dental work done before you get pregnant. The best time to have dental work done during pregnancy is the second trimester, but any emergency, such as pain or infection, should be looked at immediately.

The nausea and vomiting of pregnancy can also harm teeth by creating a highly acidic environment in the mouth. After a bout of nausea, rinse your mouth with a neutralizing solution of baking soda and water, and do not brush your teeth for 20 minutes. A fluoride rinse is another good option.

Type 2 diabetes

The link between oral disease and diabetes is also fairly well established. A study reported that periodontal disease raises the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. It is likely an inflammatory mechanism. And, in turn, oral infections can make established diabetes harder to control because higher levels of blood-borne bacteria can raise blood glucose levels. To make matters worse, people with diabetes are more susceptible to cavities, gum disease, tooth loss and the fungal infection thrush.

It stands to reason that if your blood sugar levels are too high in your bloodstream and other parts of your body, they're also too high in your mouth, where they provide bacteria with an abundant food supply and the fuel to multiply and attack the enamel of the teeth and cause cavities — another dental warning sign of diabetes.

Sinusitis

Infections in the teeth and gums can invade the sinus cavities, causing chronic sinusitis.

Earaches

In adults, certain earaches known as referred ear pain can result from decayed or infected teeth.

Respiratory conditions

Fine droplets from the mouth and throat may be aspirated into the lungs, causing infections of the lower respiratory tract or worsening existing lung conditions. Studies are now under way to learn how poor oral hygiene and periodontitis may be linked to more frequent bouts of respiratory disease in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Psychosocial effects

Poor dental and oral health — an unattractive smile, bleeding gums and malodorous breath — can fuel a lack of confidence and a diminished sense of self-worth. The Journal of Community Health Nursing reported that 53% of people with minor or major dental problems suffer from low self-esteem. Missing teeth and oral infection can even affect the way you speak, according to the Canadian Dental Association.

Clearly, your mouth and teeth are valuable team players in your psychological and physical well-being.

Nutritional status

Sore gums and missing teeth can affect your ability to eat a proper diet, particularly if you're elderly. As people lose teeth and chose to wear dentures, they often switch to a softer diet that includes a lot of refined carbohydrates, instead of fresh fruits, vegetables and meats.

If you follow your dentists' recommendations, you'll find yourself in the proverbial win-win situation — for your teeth and gums as well as your heart, blood vessels and blood sugar levels.

Oral Cancer

Your dentist is often the first health-care provider to note the presence of oral cancer. But you can check for it, too. The warning signs include the following: unexplained bleeding, open sores that don't heal in seven to 10 days, white or red patches and numbness or tingling. Also check for small lumps or thickenings on the sides or bottom of your tongue, the floor and roof of your mouth, your gums and the insides of your cheeks.