



Healthy Smile, Healthy Body

Oral Health Can Offer Window to Overall Good Health

Just as your eyes are windows to your soul, can your smile be a window to your health? Oral health experts think so.

Although researchers aren't sure whether one causes the other, oral health problems, such as periodontal disease, may suggest the need to take a closer look at a patient's overall health.

"A number of studies show an association between periodontal disease and systemic conditions," says Max Anderson, DDS, a national oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association. "In most cases, cause and effect have not been convincingly demonstrated, but the presence of periodontal diseases can signal the presence of other health issues."

Sometimes the early signs of a disease are visible to dentists when patients open wide. People with lesions or sores inside their mouths may be suffering from viral infections in their lungs, for example. Similarly, patients with unpleasantly sensitive teeth or showing a chemical erosion of tooth enamel may be the victims of acid reflux or hiatal hernia conditions.

In other cases, health researchers have found the state of a patient's oral health to be associated with a number of systemic conditions, such as diabetes and circulatory problems.

Periodontal disease is more common among people with diabetes. Young adults with diabetes are about twice as

likely to suffer from periodontal disease as those without diabetes. In fact, almost one-third of people with diabetes have severe periodontal disease. Periodontal disease progresses more rapidly and is more difficult to treat in people with uncontrolled or poorly controlled diabetes than in people without diabetes.

Another research study found that patients with periodontal disease and fewer teeth than those without periodontal disease may have an increased risk of suffering a stroke, a circulatory problem where there is a lack of blood supply in the brain.

Regardless of whether researchers establish direct cause and effect relationships between oral health problems and other health issues, dentists place their emphasis on protecting and promoting oral health for the overall well-being of their patients.

"The good news is that the precautions dentists and oral health professionals recommend people take to protect their teeth, gums, and mouth aren't harmful. So, there is no harm to stepping up your hygiene habits to improve oral health and maybe do your body some good, too," says Dr. Anderson.





Dental Checkups are Important for Managing Diabetes

Many people who have diabetes are unaware of it. However, a routine dental exam might uncover the presence of this disease.

There are ways for dentists to spot undiagnosed diabetes. Millions of diabetics also have to battle gum disease, and caring for gum disease is an important part of overall diabetes management.

“A routine oral exam could help identify health problems like diabetes. Once diagnosed, diabetics can seek much-needed treatment,” said Shannon Mills, DDS, FAGD, FICD, Vice President of Professional Relations at Northeast Delta Dental. “The mouth can offer clear-cut signals that the disease is present.”

Recent research indicates that diabetes is associated with an abnormally high degree of gum inflammation and localized bleeding, and diabetics have a higher than normal risk for periodontal disease. Controlling sugar levels can help control diabetes. Treating periodontal disease and reducing bacteria in the body are also important in the overall management of diabetes.

Statistics from the American Diabetes Association indicate that 17 million people in the United States have diabetes, and the association estimates that more than five million of them are not aware that they have the disease. Early detection is important because, when left untreated, diabetes can lead to a number of serious health complications, including kidney disease, heart disease and stroke, nerve damage, blindness, and death.

“Our goal is to highlight the connection between the condition of the mouth and the body’s processes and point out the dentist’s role in detecting and treating the oral manifestations of diabetes,” said Dr. Mills.

“We want to let people know that routine trips to the dentist can lead to more than just a nice smile,” continued Dr. Mills. “It can lead to early detection and management of a serious disease, like diabetes.”





Diabetes and Oral Health

Nearly 26 million Americans have diabetes and an estimated 79 million U.S. adults have pre-diabetes. Seven million Americans don't even know they have this disease! The relationship between diabetes and periodontal disease is two-way. The inflammation of periodontal disease negatively impacts blood glucose control while high blood sugar levels predispose patients to more severe periodontal infections.

Routine dental visits and good oral hygiene habits will help diabetic patients maintain good oral health. Patients with diabetes should know that the time spent caring for their mouths can improve their overall health including other chronic conditions often present with diabetes.

There is growing acceptance among medical professionals that diabetes is associated with increased occurrence and progression of periodontitis—so much so that periodontitis has been called the “sixth complication of diabetes.”

- Periodontal (gum) disease is more common in people with diabetes. Among young adults, those with diabetes have about twice the risk of periodontal disease as those without diabetes.
- Persons with poorly-controlled diabetes are nearly three times more likely to have severe periodontitis than those without diabetes.
- Almost one-third of people with diabetes have severe periodontal disease.
- Talk to your dental provider to be sure you are doing everything possible to achieve your best oral health.
- Tell your medical providers if you have been diagnosed with periodontal disease.

Remember: *Periodontal disease is a transmissible, bacterial infection and can be controlled!*

Diabetes is one of the ways oral health impacts your overall health. Learn more in our Health *through* Oral Wellness® [HOW®] Program.



Tobacco and Oral Health

Most people already know that smoking is the leading preventable cause of death, disease and disability in the US. Smoking can also cause chronic disease in children exposed to second-hand smoke. Nearly nine million people suffer from serious diseases caused by tobacco while 480,000 people die every year from the effects of smoking.

But did you know...?

- Tobacco use is the **#1 contributing factor** for gum disease (periodontitis)!
- Toxins from tobacco cause oral tissues to undergo changes that lead to deeper periodontal pockets around teeth; slow the healing process after dental cleanings; and cause early tooth loss in adults.
- Tobacco is a major cause of oral, esophageal, stomach, and lung cancers. Oral cancer has only a **53% five-year survival rate** and its treatment can include disfiguring surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy treatments.
- There are numerous over-the-counter and prescription products to help you quit. Many programs are available to support your efforts.
- Ask your dentist or medical provider to help you make a plan to quit. Include family and friends in your support network.
- You can call 1-800-QUIT-NOW or visit the American Lung Association's website at www.lung.org for information on quitting smoking.

Depending on where you live, there are also local resources to help you kick the tobacco habit:

Maine: Maine QuitLink - www.mainequitlink.com
1-800-QUIT-NOW

New Hampshire: QuitNow-NH - www.quitnownh.org
1-800-QUIT-NOW

Vermont: 802Quits - www.802quits.org
1-800-QUIT-NOW

Your medical insurance carrier or employer may also have a program to help you quit. Create a plan that works for you.

Remember: *Good oral health is necessary for good overall health!*





Tobacco Products Can Cause More Than Just Oral Cancer

According to the American Cancer Society, tobacco smokers can develop cancers anywhere in the mouth or throat, as well as in the voice box, esophagus, lungs, kidneys, bladder, and other organs. Plus, both smoking and smokeless tobacco can cause periodontal (gum) diseases that destroy the supporting bone around teeth, which may ultimately lead to tooth loss.

Over time, smokeless tobacco use can also lead to oral cancer. According to the Oral Cancer Foundation, more than 34,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer this year—and, of those newly diagnosed patients, only half of them will be alive in five years. The shocking fact is that most oral cancer is preventable.

Reduce your risk of developing oral cancer:

- Do not use tobacco products (including smokeless).
- Only consume alcohol in moderation.
- Use lip balm with sunscreen.

As with any cancer, early detection is key in halting the development of oral cancer. At each dental exam, a

dentist will observe the face, lips, neck, throat, and entire mouth area for signs of oral cancer such as:

- Red or white spot on oral tissue.
- Difficulty chewing, speaking, swallowing, or moving the tongue and jaw.
- Alteration in the way teeth fit together.
- A tender sore that will not heal.
- Pain or numbness on the mouth or lips.
- Wrinkled or bumpy patch inside mouth.

Quit using tobacco today. Ask your dentist how he or she can help.

Please visit our website at www.nedelta.com and choose our Interactive Oral Health & Wellness Toolkit. Here, you will find a Delta Dental Risk Assessment Tool that examines common risk indicators and provides you with custom feedback and important information on maintaining good oral health.





Ask Your Dentist or Dental Hygienist

To have the best oral and overall health, ask your dental provider some of the following questions that pertain to you or your family. Remember, poor oral health contributes significantly to medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and respiratory illnesses.

- Can you do a PreViser oral health risk assessment to determine my risk for oral diseases?
- What is my risk for future tooth decay?
- What is my risk for future gum (periodontal) disease?
- What are the signs and symptoms of gum (periodontal) disease?
- Do I have any of the signs of gum disease?
- Do I need to see a periodontist to treat my periodontal disease?
- Should I use a fluoride product to prevent decay on the exposed root surfaces of my teeth?
- What type of toothpaste is best for my individual needs?
- What type of floss would be easiest for me to use?
- Are electric toothbrushes better than manual brushes?
- Should I rinse with any particular product at night before bed?
- What products will help my dry mouth symptoms?
- Why does my dental provider need to know about my medical conditions and the medications I take?
- What causes bad breath?
- How does what I eat and drink affect my oral health?
- Why is the pH of my saliva important?
- Why are sealants important for children?





Northeast Delta Dental

The Dental Checkup: Your Prevention Connection



You take pretty good care of your teeth—brushing, and flossing daily. You don't really have any major dental issues. Is it really necessary for you to schedule dental checkups unless there is a problem?

Oral health professionals point out that there are numerous reasons to keep those checkups on your calendar, even if you take good care of your teeth.

“Just because it has been a while since you've had a cavity or a dental health issue, don't give up on those visits to the dentist,” said Michel Couret, DDS, Vice President, Professional Relations, Northeast Delta Dental. “Dental checkups continue to be an important part of taking care of teeth, preventing problems, and providing people with greater knowledge about their oral health.”

Dental health professionals will suggest the frequency that is appropriate for you. Some people don't need to be seen twice each year, while others need to be seen more often.

Preventive checkups provide dentists with opportunities to identify and intervene early in the dental disease process. This can reduce pain and the financial costs associated with severe forms of dental disease. For example, periodontal disease that goes unnoticed for lack of a checkup can progress into more serious stages, possibly resulting in pain, tooth loss, and other problems. If caught early, periodontal disease is easier to manage;

and, in some cases, is reversible, resulting in healthy teeth and gums.

Dental professionals can also use dental checkups to screen for oral cancers and other health issues that can be difficult to spot on your own. More than 120 diseases can cause specific signs and symptoms in and around the mouth and jaw. Dental professionals performing checkups can spot symptoms that could indicate serious health problems elsewhere in the body that need attention.

The prevention connection extends to recent changes in your health. Checkups allow your dentist to keep up with changes to your health status. Upon learning of medical conditions you've developed or treatments you're receiving, your dentist can recommend strategies to help you proactively counter the negative effects the conditions and treatments could otherwise have on your oral health.

Visiting the dentist for checkups is certainly easier if your employer offers dental benefits. Most dental plans cover preventive care and a limited number of checkups each year. If you aren't receiving dental coverage through your employer, ask your company's human resources department or benefits administrator if it is possible to purchase dental benefits. Most employers, when briefed on the many business-friendly reasons for offering dental benefits, will recognize their worth. Dental checkups are a great investment in your oral and overall health.



Make Brushing Fun for Little Ones

Tips for Promoting Good Oral Hygiene Habits in Kids

Sometimes the only thing more difficult than getting kids to clean their teeth properly is getting them to clean them at all. But parents have to meet the challenge, because by getting used to oral hygiene early kids can establish lifelong healthy habits and get comfortable with dental practices, which could make their first dental checkups more productive and maybe even enjoyable.

The dentists who serve as national oral health advisors for Delta Dental Plans offer the following tips for getting reluctant kids to open up and say “oral health:”

Trade places: Tired of prying your way in every time it’s time to brush the tot’s teeth? Why not reverse roles and let the child brush yours? Then you can laugh a lot and show how much fun it is to be pampered.

Show how shiny: Make sure the kids see you brushing your own teeth, and then make a point of showing off your shiny clean teeth. Ham it up; make it seem like a treat and privilege to have a shiny smile. Also, encourage your kids to show off their own smiles once their teeth are clean.

Take turns: Set an egg timer or other alarm and have the kids brush their teeth on their own for 30 seconds.

Then you brush their teeth for 30 seconds. Repeat this at least twice, or go as long as the kids will tolerate. When brushing at bedtime, it’s important that you have the last go at it. Saliva production slows down during the sleep cycle and can’t wash away as much plaque, so it’s important to make teeth as plaque-free as possible before going to sleep.

Call in reinforcements: If older children stubbornly neglect to brush or floss and repeated reminders fall on seemingly uninterested ears, maybe it’s time to change the messenger. Call the dental office before the children’s next checkup, and let the dentist know what’s going on. The same motivational message might be heeded if it comes from a third party.

When brushing, it is best to hold the toothbrush against the gumline at an angle—and with a light grasp. Plaque is soft and is better removed by thorough but light brushing than by vigorous scrubbing, which can cause unwanted wear on teeth. Children’s teeth and gums can be sensitive too, so a gentle touch will make them more comfortable.



Xylitol: Effective Tooth Decay Fighter

Almost everyone knows that eating a lot of sugary foods and drinking beverages sweetened with sugar can lead to dental decay, weight gain, and problems with diabetes. Consuming sugar-free foods and beverages is one way people reduce their risk of dental decay and avoid unnecessary calories.

Many sugar-free products are sweetened with artificial sweeteners such as saccharin (Sweet and Low®) or aspartame (Equal®). These products have no calories and cannot be converted by mouth bacteria into the acids that cause cavities. Most people use them to sweeten tea or coffee or consume them in diet drinks. For chewing gum and sugar-free candies, however, a different kind of sugar substitute known as a sugar-alcohol* is often used. These naturally occurring substances include sorbitol, mannitol, and xylitol.

These sugar alcohols taste sweet and have some calories. Like artificial sweeteners, they don't contribute to dental decay. Most sugar-free gums and candies are sweetened using one or more of these sugar alcohols. While none of these substances contribute to dental decay, only xylitol has unique properties that make it of special interest to dentists and people who want to avoid cavities.

Xylitol was used as a substitute for sugar in Finland during World War II. Because of the war, sugar was not available and the Finns learned to make a sugar substitute from widely abundant birch trees. Later, dental researchers noticed that people who used this sweetener instead of sugar had fewer cavities. Scientists now know that xylitol interferes with the growth of cavity-causing bacteria. Research continues to confirm the benefits of xylitol to help people reduce their risk of dental decay.

Once, you would have had to travel to Europe to get xylitol products. Today, however, sugar-free gums and candies

containing cavity-fighting xylitol can easily be found on store shelves in the U.S. and around the world. Many products contain xylitol in addition to other sweeteners like sorbitol.

To get the maximum benefit from xylitol, however, you have to read the label. To prevent cavities, it's important to expose mouth bacteria to enough xylitol every day; and some sugar-free gums don't contain enough xylitol to effectively reduce the number of cavity-causing bacteria. One way to be sure that you are getting the right amount is to choose products that have **xylitol** listed as the **first ingredient**.

In addition to gums and candies, xylitol is now also available as a powdered sugar substitute for use in coffee, tea, baking, and on breakfast cereal. While you can find some products in regular supermarkets, you may have to go to a health food store or buy online to get the products with the highest amounts of xylitol. Some dentists may also carry xylitol gums, mints, or other products to help patients control cavities.

The next time you visit your dentist, ask the dentist or hygienist if xylitol may be right for you. For more information about xylitol and other valuable oral health information, check out the **Oral Health Toolkit** on the Northeast Delta Dental web page at www.nedelta.com/patients and enter "xylitol" in the search field.

**While chemists describe these substances as "alcohols" they are used in very small amounts and don't have any of the effects seen with the kind of alcohol found in beer, wine, or spirits. In addition to birch trees, xylitol is found in many berries, corn husks, and other natural plant materials.*

