

# What your mouth says about your health



A routine dental exam can do more than just find cavities. By looking in your mouth, your dentist can discover things such as anemia to thyroid disease. Find out what else your mouth can reveal about your state of health.

**D**id you know that your dentist can detect more than 120 diseases during a routine exam? Whether you have undiagnosed diabetes or could be headed for a stroke, a peek at your teeth and gums can tell your dentist a mouthful about your overall health.

## Periodontal disease and diabetes

Ninety-five percent of people with diabetes also have periodontal disease. Some signs are gums that bleed during brushing; red, swollen or tender gums; bad breath or a bad taste in your mouth; and gums that pull away from your teeth.

People with poor blood sugar control have more dental problems than others, and lose more teeth than people who have their diabetes under good control. This is because diabetes lowers resistance and delays healing. When a patient isn't responding to dental treatment, the dentist may suspect undiagnosed diabetes. If you have periodontal disease, your risk for developing diabetes increases.

## Other illnesses linked to periodontal disease:

People with periodontal disease are more likely than others to have certain conditions. Some examples include:

- **Heart disease**

Studies have shown a connection between the bacteria found in periodontal disease and the bacteria found in heart disease. (However, antibiotics against these bacteria do not prevent heart disease.)

- **Prematurity**

Pregnant women who have periodontal disease are up to seven times more likely to deliver a premature or low-birth-weight baby. Almost 20 percent of premature and low-birth-weight infant cases can be associated with periodontal disease.

- **Respiratory conditions**

The bacteria in periodontal disease can aggravate respiratory conditions, traveling to the lower respiratory system.

- **Rheumatoid arthritis**

Patients with rheumatoid arthritis are more than twice as likely to have periodontal disease than others. They also tend to lose more teeth.

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### Stroke detection

Dental X-rays can reveal calcifications (blockages) in the carotid arteries of the neck and head. If you have such blockages, you're more likely to suffer from stroke than others. If your dentist notices calcifications on your X-ray, you may be referred to a specialist and preventive measures can be taken.

### Oral cancer

Dental examination normally includes a screening for oral cancer, which can be identified by tumors or lesions in the mouth. If caught early, oral cancer can usually be treated. If not, it can spread to other parts of the body.

### Eating disorders

Dentists can spot anorexia and bulimia by redness in the mouth and thin tooth enamel. This is because stomach acid from repetitive vomiting erodes the enamel.

### Oral thrush

Oral thrush, a yeast infection, can be detected by a white coating on the tongue and throat. Newborns and people with weakened immune systems are particularly vulnerable. Antibiotics can also cause thrush.

### Other conditions

Other conditions your dentist can detect include HIV, thyroid disease, drug abuse, osteoporosis, skin diseases and leukemia.

### How your dentist spots certain health problems:

- **Heart disease:** Jaw pain with exertion.
- **Kidney failure:** Dry mouth; metallic taste; ulcerated mouth; delayed teething in children.
- **Diabetes:** "Fruity" breath odor; mouth dryness; mouth infections; rapid tooth decay; burning tongue.
- **Anemia:** Paleness of gums; irritation at corners of mouth; red, burning tongue.
- **Anorexia and bulimia:** Sensitive teeth; worn tooth enamel; strong breath; "round" face (caused by enlarged glands).
- **HIV:** Sores; white patches on sides of tongue; whiteness of tongue caused by oral thrush.

You have more reasons than ever — more than 120 of them — to see your dentist regularly. If you haven't had a visit lately, why not make an appointment?

#### Sources:

American Dental Association  
American Dental Hygienists' Association  
UCLA School of Dentistry  
American Academy of Periodontology

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