



## HEALTH

*Health & You*

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### RESOURCES

**Guideline on Perinatal Oral Health Care**, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, [www.aapd.org/media/Policies\\_Guidelines/G\\_PerinatalOralHealthCare.pdf](http://www.aapd.org/media/Policies_Guidelines/G_PerinatalOralHealthCare.pdf)

**Manage Your Oral Health**, American Dental Association, [ada.org/364.aspx](http://ada.org/364.aspx)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, [www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/AAG/doh.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/AAG/doh.htm)

**Mayo Clinic**, [www.mayoclinic.com/health/dental/DE00001](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/dental/DE00001)

**Oral health is about more than just taking care of your teeth. Studies have shown that it also can impact your overall health.**

# Oral Health & Your Overall Health

**R**ecent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that advanced gum disease affects between 4–12 percent of adults in the US. However, oral health is about more than just taking care of your teeth. Studies have shown that it also can impact your overall health.

### INCREASED RISK OF HEART AND LUNG DISEASE

Researchers have identified a definite link between heart disease and poor oral health. *Streptococcus mutans* (*S. mutans*) is the bacterium that leads to tooth decay. Brushing, flossing, and having your teeth cleaned help to rid your mouth of *S. mutans*. However, overly vigorous flossing and even some dental procedures can cause *S. mutans* to spread to your bloodstream.

Typically, your immune system will destroy the bacteria; but if they are not destroyed, an infection of the heart known as endocarditis can result, causing heart problems and possibly death if not treated. New studies show that this transfer of bacteria can increase a person's risk of developing respiratory infections, making people with gum disease 33 percent more likely to develop lung cancer.

By limiting the number of *S. mutans* in your mouth through commonsense approaches such as regular brushing and flossing, a healthy diet that limits sugar intake, and regular dental cleanings, you can help to protect not only your teeth and gums, but your entire body as well.

### PAIN

Many people experience pain as a result of problems with their jaw joints, also known as Temporomandibular Joint Disorder (TMJ). People with TMJ may

hear a clicking sound when they open or close their jaw or may not be able to fully open their jaw. Grinding your teeth, also known as bruxism, may also occur with TMJ. Excessive teeth grinding, whether during sleep or when under stress, can damage tooth enamel, making the teeth more sensitive to hot and cold foods and beverages. It can also wear down your incisor teeth, causing them to be rounded at the edges rather than with sharp edges.

You may not consider a problem with your mouth to be the cause of pain in other areas of your body. For example, the pain caused by decaying teeth or an oral infection might be misinterpreted as a sinus infection or a migraine headache. If you have an oral infection, in particular one that is causing pain elsewhere, it should be addressed by a dental health professional.

Taking over-the-counter pain medication is not the solution. Infections caused by a decaying tooth, often referred to as an abscess, need antibiotics to rid your body of the infection. Without it, the infection can turn life-threatening once the bacteria enter the bloodstream. If you believe you have an infection from a decaying tooth, you should seek dental treatment immediately.

### PREGNANCY AND DELIVERY

New studies have shown that women who have gum disease may have more difficulty getting pregnant and may have a greater chance of delivering their babies pre-term. According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) mothers with poor oral health and high levels of cariogenic oral bacteria are at greater risk for infecting their children and increasing their children's risk of

tooth decay at an early age. To ensure that pregnant mothers received the care they needed, the AAPD developed guidelines to help dental health professionals protect the health of the mother and unborn child during preventive cleanings and necessary dental work.

**ORAL HEALTH SCREENINGS AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES**

Who knew that your six-month cleanings could be so beneficial to your health? Along with examining for tooth decay and other oral health problems, cleanings can be an excellent way to screen for oral cancer and diabetes. Because oral cancer can affect the way your teeth fit together, dental x-rays can be a helpful tool. Although the biggest risk factors for oral cancer are smoking and alcohol use, the ADA notes that approximately 25 percent of oral cancer patients do not have either of these risk factors; therefore, early screening is important for everyone.

Along with x-rays, dental health professionals may perform a visual exam to check for lesions or other abnormalities in your mouth. The number of missing teeth and degree of inflammation in the area where the gums touch the teeth can help identify patients with undiagnosed diabetes or pre-diabetes. This diagnosis can be instrumental in helping you seek medical treatment and in preventing possible complications from the disease.

Because your oral health affects more



than just your teeth, it is important to have regular cleanings, brush at least two times a day, floss daily, and make good health decisions, such as not using tobacco and maintaining healthy nutrition. Experts recommend limiting sugar and instead choosing firm foods to snack on to help clean your teeth while you chew, to snack on instead. Researchers have also determined that the lactic acid produced from eating dairy products can help prevent tooth decay.

Taking better care of your teeth will not only limit the need for dental work, it may also extend your life. A 27-year study has shown that poor oral habits can be passed down through generations. By learning to take better care of your own oral health, you may also be protecting the oral health of the people whom you love. ▲

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