



For Immediate Release

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Part Dentist, Part Detective

Importance of Dental Visits Increases with Understanding of Connection to Overall Health

ANKENY, IA—February 20, 2007—Heading to the dentist’s office? Your visit may double as a private health investigation. As research continues to uncover links between the oral health and the rest of our bodies, making regular visits to the dental office is becoming all the more important.

“Routine dental visits can uncover a number of things about our overall health and put us on the path to preventing and managing bigger health issues for ourselves and our families,” said Dr. Ed Schooley, vice president and dental director, Delta Dental of Iowa.

So what does this potential for finding other conditions mean for people heading to the dentist? Patients will find their initial and follow-up exams to cover health topics outside their mouths. Dental professionals will inquire about their medical history, discuss medications the patients are taking, and may measure vital signs. All of this is a part of diagnosing the oral health of patients and developing treatment plans.

“There are many factors that contribute to the state of our oral health and our overall health. Patients should expect dental professionals to take a systematic approach to protecting and promoting their oral health,” Dr. Schooley said.

Here are some diseases and the clues they leave¹ in our mouths for oral health professionals to discover.

- **Upper respiratory disorders.** Viral infections in the lungs of sufferers can produce lesions or sores inside their mouths.
- **Anorexia nervosa and bulimia.** The persistent, induced vomiting of people who suffer from bulimia can cause a chemical erosion of their tooth enamel and make their teeth unpleasantly sensitive. Their fillings can become raised above the eroded surface of their teeth, where the fillings can easily chip during chewing. The starvation that often accompanies anorexia enlarges salivary glands located below and in front of ears, so the faces of sufferers can appear full and round.

- **Acid Reflux and Hiatal Hernia.** Sufferers who repeatedly burp bile into their mouths can experience eroded tooth enamel, sensitive teeth and a bitter taste in their mouths.
- **Diabetes.** Clues left in the mouths of diabetics include inflammation, infections, dry mouth, burning tongue, persistent gingivitis, and multiple lesions. Even patients who know they have diabetes may require special care: they may be taking medications that inhibit their ability to produce saliva, an important ally in the fight against cavities and gum disease.
- **Kidney failure.** Dentists can also find evidence of kidney failure. Retarded tooth development in children, dry mouth, odor, metallic taste, ulcers on the tongues and gums in adults may lead the dentist to suggest a visit to a medical doctor to check for properly functioning kidneys.
- **Anemia.** Some of the earliest signs of anemia, where our bodies don't produce enough oxygen-carrying red blood cells, are oral. These signs include burning, fiery red tongue, inflamed mucous membranes and difficulty swallowing.
- **Osteoporosis.** As part of standard first visits, dentists and their staff take x-rays of the mouth area to spot oral health problems, typically no more serious than cavities. However, in some cases these x-rays show jawbones that have eroded and become thinner, a symptom of osteoporosis.

For more information about oral health and overall health, visit the Delta Dental website at <http://www.deltadental.com/Public/OralHealth/oral.jsp>.

Delta Dental of Iowa, the largest and most experienced provider of dental benefits in the state, is a member of the Delta Dental Plans Association, a national organization of not-for-profit Delta Dental member companies. The national association is the largest dental benefits carrier in the nation, providing coverage to more than 47 million people in nearly 81,000 employer groups.

Delta Dental of Iowa supports a number of community benefit programs as part of its not-for-profit mission to improve the oral health of Iowans. In 2006, the company contributed more than \$475,000 to oral health projects in Iowa, benefiting underserved children and the elderly.

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1. Steven L. Bricker, Robert P. Langlais, and Craig S. Miller, *Oral Diagnosis, Oral Medicine and Treatment Planning* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1994).