

# Benefits Spotlight

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## Exploring the connection between breast cancer and gum disease

Your oral health isn't just limited to your mouth — it can affect your overall health, too. You may have heard about the links between poor oral health and conditions like diabetes and heart disease, but you may not know that gum disease is also linked to an increased risk of breast cancer.

### A closer look at the connection

A number of studies have suggested women with gum disease can be at higher risk of developing breast cancer. Researchers aren't exactly sure what's causing the connection. One possibility is that gum disease bacteria can leave the mouth and travel elsewhere in the body through the bloodstream and contribute to other chronic diseases, such as breast cancer. Another idea is that the inflammation caused by gum disease can affect a disease in a different part of the body.<sup>1</sup>

One study found that overall, the risk of breast cancer was 14% higher in women who had gum disease compared to women with no gum disease. So, if the average breast cancer risk is about 12%, a woman with gum disease had about a 13.5% risk. And women who have a history of smoking had an even higher risk of developing breast cancer.<sup>1</sup>

More evidence is needed to understand the true connection between gum disease and breast cancer, and it's not clear whether having good oral health actually lowers your risk of developing breast cancer.

### How to limit chemotherapy oral health side effects

Chemotherapy is a common treatment for breast cancer. Chemotherapy has several side effects, including some that affect your teeth and mouth. Common oral health side effects of chemotherapy include:

- Inflammation in the mouth and gums
- Dry mouth
- Increased risk of mouth infection
- Mouth sores

These side effects can affect your quality of life and harm the health of your mouth. Seeing your dentist before starting chemotherapy is a good way to learn more about the potential side effects and how to minimize their impact on your daily life.

## How to prevent gum disease

Gum disease has stages ranging from mild (known as gingivitis) to severe (known as periodontitis). Mild gum disease may have no or very minimal symptoms, but your dentist will be able to identify it at a preventive dental exam and give you at-home strategies for reducing your risk of the disease worsening. Good at-home dental hygiene, including twice daily brushing and daily flossing, will help keep gum disease at bay.

Telltale signs of gum disease include red, swollen and bleeding gums. If you notice changes in your gums, call your dentist. It's much easier to treat gum disease at its early stages than when it's developed into severe disease.

Scheduling twice yearly dental visits is an important way to understand your risk for gum disease and take steps to address any existing gum disease. Need to find a new dentist? Our [Find a Provider](#) tool easily connects you to in-network dentists near you.

## REFERENCE

[Breastcancer.org](https://www.breastcancer.org)

## Q&A With Dr. Jeff: How do I find a quality dentist?

You should see your dentist twice a year for preventive dental appointments — that means your dentist is likely the health care provider you see the most. In the market for a new dentist? Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin, Chief Dental Officer at Delta Dental of Iowa, offers his expert tips on how to find a great one.

**Q: What questions should I ask during an initial meeting with a dentist to gauge their experience and whether they will be a good fit?**

**Dr. Chaffin:** While it is hard to say there is a magic question or two to assess the quality of a dentist, the ability to connect with the health care provider is important. You should feel comfortable and build trust with your provider. Some things to consider are the competence of the dentist and the way they communicate with you on an individual level. You can also investigate their professional affiliations and their dedication to continued learning after dental school. One thing that I think is important is that the provider and their office have a focus on prevention, since most dental disease is largely preventable.

**Q: What role do online reviews and patient testimonials play in understanding the quality of a dentist's services?**

**Dr. Chaffin:** Online reviews have proliferated over the past few years. Most of us have used various reviews to look up hotels, restaurants and health care providers. Some of those reviews can be largely biased, so you must take caution when reading them. Delta Dental has introduced a new quality tool called DentaQual, which rates dentists on 40 metrics using claims submitted from over 70 national payers. It's an objective rating tool that doesn't rely

on subjective patient reviews. We have the DentaQual star ratings in our provider directory, and this is something that you might find helpful in finding a new dentist.

**Q: I know selecting an in-network dentist is important from a cost standpoint. Why does it save me money?**

**Dr. Chaffin:** Dentists who are in-network means they have signed a contract with the dental insurance company to accept discounts. So, when you go to an in-network dentist, you can save money on those covered services, and the dentist must accept those contractual discounts. The amount of discount varies by dentist, but the value to the dentist is that they attract and keep patients enrolled in dental insurance.

**Q: In-network dentists are also vetted by Delta Dental of Iowa. How does Delta Dental of Iowa ensure its in-network dentists stay up-to-date with the latest advancements and techniques in dentistry?**

**Dr. Chaffin:** Each network dentist is credentialed when they sign up for insurance, and this monitoring continues through the time they are a network provider. Credentialing ensures that the dentist has the proper training, has the proper insurance, and does not have significant issues with the State Dental Board. Insurance companies want a large number of dentists in their networks — but we don't accept all.

**Q: What are some warning signs that may indicate a dentist might not provide the level of quality care patients expect?**

**Dr. Chaffin:** Before I talk about warning signs, I'd suggest that if you question a treatment plan — especially if it's very large and expensive — you can always seek a second opinion. For example, before spending \$25,000 on a comprehensive oral rehabilitation that includes implants, seek a second opinion if you are not sure. Often, the additional examination at a new dentist will be out of pocket, meaning insurance may not pay, it could save you a lot of money and hassle.

Now, for red flags: There can be complications with dental procedures, but if you are having complications with almost every procedure, and the dentist can't remedy those complications, that might be a warning sign of quality issues. For example, let's say you have a filling placed, and that filling falls out shortly after. Fillings do fail and can fail quickly sometimes, but that should be rare.

**Q: Are there any other important factors I should consider when trying to find a new dentist?**

**Dr. Chaffin:** Ask family, friends, neighbors and coworkers for their recommendations when searching for a dentist. Convenience is also important in selecting a dentist. Depending on your work-life balance, you may like appointments early in the morning, later in the day or on weekends, so you want to make sure that your dentist office can accommodate your needs. Lastly, if you have dental insurance, you want to choose an in-network dentist because that maximizes the value of your dental benefit.