

Healthy You

FAST FACTS FOR YOUR HEALTH

What Your Teeth and Gums Say About Your Health

When you go to the dentist, you know you're protecting the health of your teeth and gums. But did you know that dental conditions can reveal clues to your medical history, too? Here are seven unexpected links between oral health and overall health.

1. Chronic Conditions and Gum Disease

Gum disease, also known as periodontitis, is linked to several chronic diseases. Though the connection isn't totally understood, researchers think the combination of bacteria in the mouth and the inflammation (swelling) associated with gum disease has an effect on some medical conditions. And, some medical conditions themselves can damage your oral health, too.

One of these chronic conditions is diabetes. Diabetes is a condition characterized by higher levels of blood sugar throughout the body. More blood sugar raises your risk of gum disease and tooth decay. It's a vicious cycle, because if you develop gum disease when you have diabetes, it becomes even harder to control your blood sugar. Additionally, having diabetes makes it harder for your body to fight infection. Make sure you tell your dentist if you have diabetes—he or she can share simple ways to help keep your gums healthy while you manage your blood sugar.

Gum disease is also much more common in people with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) than in the general population. While the link isn't totally clear, researchers believe the inflammatory response in people with RA makes them susceptible to gum disease. Having RA can also lead to poor dental hygiene, as the joint pain of RA can make holding a toothbrush or maneuvering floss difficult. Fortunately, your dentist can share recommendations for products to help make brushing and flossing easier for people with joint pain.

2. GERD and Tooth Enamel

If you experience heartburn two or more times a week, you may have gastroesophageal reflux disease—better known as GERD. GERD occurs when your stomach acid creeps up into your throat and potentially into your mouth. This acid can erode your enamel, your teeth's outer protective layer. You may not feel any pain or discomfort as a result of GERD, but your dentist will be able to see any damage during a preventive dental visit and can share ways to keep acid away from your teeth.

3. Stress and Oral Health

Stress shows itself in your oral health in several ways. People who are stressed often grind or clench their teeth and jaw—a condition called bruxism. In severe cases, bruxism can damage your teeth and jaw, and it can cause major headache pain. Stress may also lead to unhealthy coping strategies, such as smoking, drinking and ignoring at-home hygiene like brushing and flossing, all of which harm your oral health.

4. Osteoporosis and Oral Bone Loss

Osteoporosis is a disease marked by bone weakness and loss throughout your body, including your teeth and jaw. If you have osteoporosis and take medication to help prevent bone loss, make sure to tell your dentist, as some bone-boosting medications have a small risk of harming your jaw bone.

5. Anemia and Tongue and Gum Appearance

Anemia is a condition involving your red blood cells—it means either you don't have enough red blood cells or your red blood cells don't contain enough hemoglobin (a protein that carries oxygen). You may not know you are anemic, but your mouth can share hints with your dentist. Soreness and pale gums are two big clues, also a swollen and glossy tongue are signs that you may need to talk to your doctor about getting tested.

6. Eating Disorders and Mouth Health

If you're struggling with an eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia, your teeth may show signs of it. Compulsive vomiting from bulimia causes swelling in your mouth and neck. Bulimia also makes your mouth more acidic, which can rapidly wear down your teeth's enamel (the outer, protective covering on your teeth). Eating disorders rob your body of key nutrients, as well, which reduces the strength, vitality and health of your mouth.

7. Medications that Affect Your Teeth and Mouth

All medications bear the potential for side effects, even over-the-counter ones. You may be surprised that some common drugs, including antihistamines, decongestants and painkillers, cause dry mouth, which can lead to cavities and gum disease. If you regularly take a medication, even if it's not by prescription, talk to your dentist. He or she can share ways to combat dry mouth and ward off any potential complications.

Prevention Is Power: You and Your Dentist Work Together to Protect Your Health

As you can see, your mouth reveals more about your overall health than you may think. Practicing at-home hygiene like twice-daily brushing and flossing is essential to maintaining healthy teeth and gums, but don't forget to schedule your preventive dental visits every 6 months. Your dentist will ensure any problems are caught early.

Need help finding an in-network dentist? Delta Dental of Iowa's [Find a Provider](#) tool is a great place to start your search.

SOURCE:

<https://www.webmd.com/oral-health/ss/slideshow-teeth-gums>

<https://www.health.com/condition/oral-health/oral-symptoms>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/dental/art-20047475>

FAQ: How to Graduate to Your Own Dental Plan

Whether you're preparing to get off your family's dental coverage or have a child who's ready to graduate onto their own insurance plan, these tips will help ease the transition and keep everyone covered.

Why Should I Get My Own Dental Insurance?

Dental insurance helps protect not only your oral health but also your overall health and your financial health.

Almost all dental insurance plans completely cover preventive dental care, including twice-yearly dental exams, cleanings and X-rays. These visits not only give your mouth a deep clean, they also identify any potential problems—from cavities and gum disease to oral cancer—before they become serious and costly health problems.

Establishing routine dental care is certainly great for your mouth, but your teeth and gums can also reveal clues into your overall health, too.

Finally, remember that no one is immune to dental problems. Dental emergencies, such as breaking a tooth in a fall or sports injury, can cause serious problems if left untreated. And, if you need an important dental procedure, like a filling to treat tooth decay, you may need to pay a high out-of-pocket cost if you don't have dental insurance.

How Do I Pick the Right Plan?

Picking the right dental insurance plan doesn't have to be a headache-inducing affair.

When Do I Need to Get Off My Parents' Dental Plan?

For most plans you can stay on your parents' dental plan until you're 26 years old (be sure to check their plan rules). If you're still on your parents' plan and approaching your 26th birthday, now is the time to explore enrolling in an [individual dental insurance plan](#) to ensure you don't have a gap in coverage. Or, if your employer offers dental coverage, talk to the benefits manager at your workplace for details on how to enroll.

Step 1: Consider your budget and anticipated dental care needs. It's impossible to predict exactly what dental coverage you'll need, but it's important to consider your dental usage when choosing a plan and align it with your budget. When you have an idea of your budget and what you want to gain from your dental care, picking a plan becomes easier.

Step 2: Get the details from your employer. Employers typically allow you to enroll for benefits at three points: 1) when you start your job, 2) during the annual open enrollment period and 3) during a qualifying life event (like getting married). Many employers have benefits managers who can answer questions about the dental plans your company offers and help enroll you in a plan.

Step 3: Pick your in-network dentist. Picking an in-network dentist is the best way to take most advantage of your dental plan. Visiting an in-network dentist ensures you'll pay less for care compared to using an out-of-network dentist.

Fortunately, Delta Dental of Iowa has the largest dental network in Iowa and the United States, so you'll have the greatest pool of dentists from which to choose. Visit www.deltadentalia.com/find-a-provider for a list of in-network dentists.