

HEALTHY MOUTH, HEALTHY BODY

Q. Could the health of my mouth affect my general health?

A. There are new findings which support something that dental professionals have suspected for a long time: infections in the mouth can cause problems elsewhere in the body.

Q. What problems could my dental health cause?

A. Problems which may be caused or made worse by poor dental health include:

- Heart disease
- Strokes
- Diabetes
- Premature and low-birth-weight babies
- Respiratory (lung) disease

Q. How can the health of my mouth affect my heart?

A. In people who have gum disease, bacteria from the mouth can get into the blood stream. It can then affect the heart by sticking to fatty deposits in the blood vessels of the heart. This can make clots more likely to form. Blood clots can reduce normal blood flow, so that the heart does not get all the oxygen and nutrients it needs. If the blood flow is badly affected this could lead to a heart attack. People with gum disease are almost twice as likely to have coronary artery disease than those without gum disease.

Q. What is the link between gum disease and strokes?

A. Several studies have looked at the connection between mouth infection and strokes. They have found that people diagnosed with a stroke are more likely to have gum disease than people who have not had one.

Q. How could diabetes affect my dental health?

A. People with diabetes are more likely to have gum disease than people without it. This is probably because diabetics are more likely to get infections in general. People who do not know they have

diabetes, or whose diabetes is not under control, are especially at risk.

If you do have diabetes it is important that any gum disease is diagnosed, because it can increase your blood sugar. This would put you at risk of diabetic complications.

Also, if you are diabetic, you may find that you heal more slowly. If you have a problem with your gums, or have problems after visits to your dentist, discuss this with your dentist before dental treatment.

New research has shown that you are more likely to develop diabetes if you have gum disease.

Q. Could gum disease affect my unborn baby?

A. Pregnant women who have gum disease may be seven times more likely to have a baby that is premature and with a low birth weight. It seems that gum disease raises the levels of the biological fluids that bring on labour. Research also suggests that women whose gum disease gets worse during pregnancy have an even higher risk of having a premature baby.

Q. How could bacteria in my mouth affect my lungs?

A. Bacterial chest infections are thought to be caused by breathing in fine droplets from the throat and mouth into the lungs. This can cause infections such as pneumonia, or could worsen an existing condition. People with gum disease have higher levels of bacteria in their mouths and may therefore be more likely to get chest infections.

Q. What are the tell-tale signs I should look out for?

A. Visit your dentist or hygienist if you have any of the symptoms of gum disease, which can include:

- Inflammation of the gums, causing them to be red, swollen and to bleed easily, especially when brushing.
- An unpleasant taste in your mouth.
- Bad breath
- Loose teeth
- Regular mouth infections

Q. Do I need to tell my dentist about any changes to my general health?

A. Always tell your dentist about any changes to your general health. It is especially important to tell them if you are pregnant or have heart disease, diabetes, respiratory disease or have ever had a stroke. You also need to tell them about any medicines you are taking as these can affect both your treatment and the health of your mouth.

Q. Does gum disease run in families?

A. Although there is some evidence that gum disease runs in families, the main cause is the plaque which forms on the surface of your teeth. To prevent gum disease you need to ensure you remove all the plaque from your teeth every day.

Q. How can I help to stop my gum disease getting worse?

A. If you have gum disease, your dentist or hygienist will usually give your teeth a thorough clean to remove any scale or tartar. This may take a number of sessions with the dentist or hygienist.

They will also show you how to effectively remove the soft plaque yourself, by cleaning all the surfaces of your teeth thoroughly at home. Plaque is a sticky film of bacteria which forms on the teeth and gums every day.

Gum disease is never cured. But as long as you keep up the home care you have been taught you can slow down its progress and even stop it all together. You must make sure you remove plaque every day, and go for regular check-ups with the dentist or hygienist, as often as they recommend.

Q. Can exercise help to prevent gum disease?

A. A recent study has shown that people who stay fit and healthy are 40% less likely to develop tooth-threatening gum infections, that could lead to gum disease. It was also found that not exercising, not

keeping to a normal body weight and unhealthy eating habits made a person much more likely to get advanced gum disease.

If you are serious about your health – and your teeth – you will need to exercise, eat a healthy balanced diet and keep to a normal body weight.

Q. Can smoking affect my teeth and gums?

A. Smoking can make gum disease much worse. People who smoke are more likely to produce bacterial plaque that leads to gum disease. The gums are affected because smoking means you have less oxygen in your blood stream, so the infected gums do not heal. Smoking can also lead to tooth staining, more teeth lost because of gum disease, bad breath, and in more severe cases mouth cancer.