

Oral Health

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In recent years, the dental and medical literature as well as the mainstream media has featured a number of articles that highlight links between oral health and general health. Some of these articles have been emblazoned with dramatic headlines while others have been more responsible in cautiously pointing out emerging evidence of possible connections between oral conditions and systemic conditions. Many of us don't know that our oral health offers clues about our overall health - or that problems in our mouth can affect the rest of our body. People should be educated about the possible link between the two.

Like most areas of the human body, our mouth is populated with various bacteria species mostly harmless. Normally the body's natural defenses and good oral health care, such as daily brushing and flossing, can keep these bacteria under control. However, without proper oral hygiene, bacteria can reach levels that might lead to oral infections, such as tooth decay and gum disease. Studies also suggest that the inflammation associated with periodontitis - a severe form of gum disease caused by bacteria might play a role in some systemic diseases.

Oral health might contribute to various diseases and conditions, including:

- **Endocarditis:** Endocarditis is an infection of the inner lining of your heart (endocardium). Endocarditis typically occurs when bacteria or other germs from another part of your body, such as mouth, spread through bloodstream and attach to damaged areas in your heart.
- **Cardiovascular disease:** Some research suggests that heart disease, clogged arteries and stroke might be linked to the inflammation and infections that oral bacteria can cause.
- **Pregnancy and birth:** Periodontitis has been linked to premature birth and low birth weight.

Certain systemic conditions also might affect our oral health, including:

- **Diabetes:** Diabetes reduces the body's resistance to infection - putting the gums at risk. Gum disease appears to be more frequent and severe among people who have diabetes. Research shows that people who have gum disease have a harder time controlling their blood sugar levels, and that regular periodontal care can improve diabetes control.
- **HIV/AIDS:** Oral problems, such as painful mucosal lesions, are common in people who have HIV/AIDS.
- **Osteoporosis:** Osteoporosis - which causes bones to become weak and brittle - might be linked with periodontal bone loss and tooth loss. Drugs used to treat osteoporosis carry a small risk of damage to the bones of the jaw.

Other conditions that might be linked to oral health include eating disorders, rheumatoid arthritis, head and neck cancers, and Sjogren's syndrome - an immune system disorder that causes dry mouth.

Because of these potential links, tell your dentist if you're taking any medications or have had any changes in your overall health - especially if you've had any recent illnesses or you have a chronic condition, such as diabetes.

To protect your oral health, practice good oral hygiene every day. For example:

- Eat a healthy diet and limit between-meal snacks.
- Brush your teeth at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss daily.
- Replace your toothbrush every three to four months or sooner
- Schedule regular dental checkups and cleanings.
- Avoid tobacco use.

Also, contact your dentist as soon as an oral health problem arises. Taking care of your oral health is an investment in your overall health.