

Oral health: A window to your overall health

Your oral health is more important than you might realize. Get the facts about how the health of your mouth, teeth and gums can affect your general health.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Did you know that your oral health offers clues about your overall health — or that problems in your mouth can affect the rest of your body? Protect yourself by learning more about the connection between your oral health and overall health.

What's the connection between oral health and overall health?

Like many areas of the body, your mouth is teeming with bacteria — most of them 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.

In addition, certain medications — such as decongestants, antihistamines, painkillers, diuretics and antidepressants — can reduce saliva flow. Saliva washes away food and neutralizes acids produced by bacteria in the mouth, helping to protect you from microbial invasion or overgrowth that might lead to disease.

Studies also suggest that oral bacteria and the inflammation associated with periodontitis — a severe form of gum disease — might play a role in some diseases. In addition, certain diseases, such as diabetes and HIV/AIDS, can lower the body's resistance to infection, making oral health problems more severe.

What conditions may be linked to oral health?

Your 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 your mouth, spread through your 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 conditions also might affect your 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.
- **Alzheimer's disease.** Worsening oral health is seen as Alzheimer's disease progresses.

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.

How can I protect my oral health?

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

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss daily.
- Eat a healthy diet and limit between-meal snacks.
- Replace your toothbrush every three to four months or sooner if bristles are frayed.
- 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.