

Connecting Oral and Overall Health

Regular dental exams not only help decrease your risk of oral health problems, such as cavities and gum disease, but also may help to diagnose other, sometimes life-threatening, medical conditions. Serious diseases like diabetes and cancer often can be detected from signs and symptoms inside your mouth. In fact, many diseases with oral manifestations may first present orally. Dentists are a very important part of your health care team, as they can recognize the symptoms of these diseases when they assess your oral health.

Diabetes

More than 25 million people in the United States suffer from diabetes. Diabetes is associated with high levels of blood sugar and is known to lower resistance to infection and increase the chances of:

- Gum disease, including gums that bleed easily or are tender and swollen
- Tooth decay
- Taste impairment
- Inflammatory skin disease
- Persistent bad breath
- Changes in teeth position

Additionally, patients with diabetes, especially those with dentures, are more likely to experience oral fungal infections, including thrush and oral candidiasis.

Oral cancer

During your regularly scheduled dental checkup, your dentist will search for signs of oral cancer, including:

- Sores that bleed easily or do not heal
- Crusted, rough areas of skin
- Lumps or thick hard spots
- Red, brown, or white patches
- Changes in the lymph nodes or other tissues around the mouth and neck
- Tenderness, pain, or numbness inside the mouth
- Changes in the way teeth fit together

While dentists check all patients for these signs and symptoms, patients with a history of smoking, using smokeless tobacco, or drinking heavily are at an increased risk for developing oral cancer.

Eating disorders

Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, physically damage both your oral and overall health. These disorders, which include patterns of insufficient or excessive food intake, can rob the body of much-needed vitamins and minerals, creating deficiencies that may present themselves orally.

Without proper nutrition, the gums can lose their healthy pink color and become increasingly soft and tender, bleeding easily. Additionally, disorders that involve excessive vomiting, such as bulimia, repeatedly expose the teeth to stomach acid and can cause tooth discoloration



and erosion. In addition to loss of tooth enamel and thin, sensitive teeth, those with eating disorders also may experience swollen salivary glands and dry mouth.

Alcohol use disorders

Alcohol use disorders affect more than 17 million adults in the U.S. alone. In addition to causing irreparable social and medical problems, alcohol use disorders can severely impact your oral health. Dentists treating patients with alcohol abuse problems may observe the following signs and symptoms:

- Tooth decay
- Tooth erosion
- Moderate to severe gum disease
- Gum irregularities
- Poor dental hygiene

Regularly scheduled dental exams allow your dentist to detect and monitor diseases that damage your mouth, teeth, and gums. During your visit, make sure to inform your dentist about any medical conditions you have and any medicines you are taking currently. Remember, maintaining a healthy body includes taking care of your oral health.



KnowYourTeeth.com

Brought to you by the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD), this website answers important dental health questions, offers the latest information on current treatments, provides tips for first-rate oral hygiene, and helps visitors find highly qualified general dentists near where they live.

The AGD is a member of the Partnership for Healthy Mouths, Healthy Lives, a first-of-its-kind national dental coalition composed of 35 leading dental health organizations. Look for more information about the Kids' Healthy Mouths campaign at www.2min2x.org.

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