

Oral Health and Your Body

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Some people are better rules followers than others. Some people are more organized. Some people place more time investing in their health and wellness. These are likely the same folks that brush their teeth multiple times a day and floss daily, rather than the day before their dentist appointment and after the occasional corn on the cob leaves something annoying between their teeth. But, good oral hygiene isn't just important because your dentist says you should do it.



Perhaps you remember Lucy's famous lines, "Ugh, I've been kissed by a dog! I have dog germs!" Her dog Snoopy likely had dog breath and a mouth full of bacteria. What Lucy didn't realize when she requested a kiss from Schroeder without hesitation, was that human's mouths are also full of bacteria.



When people maintain good oral hygiene and are otherwise healthy, their body's immune system keeps their oral bacteria contained and keeps it from wreaking havoc in our bodies. It will likely come as no surprise that if you didn't brush your teeth you would end up with tooth decay leading to cavities and gum diseases like gingivitis and periodontitis. But did you realize that poor oral health can lead to diseases in other parts of your body? And conversely, diseases in your body can lead to worsening oral health.

Risks of Poor Oral Health

- **Bacteremia** – If a patient has a lot of bacteria in their mouth and they develop an abscess or a cut in their mouth, the bacteria can enter into the blood stream. This is called bacteremia. Patient with bacteremia have infection throughout their body and this can lead to a life-threatening condition called sepsis. Bacteremia can also be difficult to treat, requiring weeks of intravenous antibiotics and even surgery, if they attach themselves to the patient's heart valves (endocarditis) or prosthetic joints.
- **Cardiovascular disease** – While the connection is not clearly understood, patients with a lot of inflammation in their mouth from bacteria, are more likely to have heart attacks (myocardial infarctions), clogged arteries (atherosclerosis), and strokes (cerebral vascular accidents).
- **Pregnancy complications** - Periodontitis has been linked to premature birth and low birth weight.
- **Pneumonia** – Bacteria and fungi in your mouth can be inhaled or aspirated into the lungs. Aspiration occurs when people swallow and saliva ends up in their lungs instead of in their

esophagus and stomach. This can occur if their muscles are weak or they swallow incorrectly. Once bacteria or fungi get into the lungs, they can cause a host of problems including pneumonia or bronchiectasis.

- Diabetes – Gum disease, like any infection, doesn't cause diabetes, but it definitely makes it harder to treat. Gum disease raises blood sugar and makes it hard to regulate.
- Asthma and COPD – Gum disease can worsen the inflammation in a patient's lungs, worsening asthma and COPD.

Things that Make Oral Health Worse

- Diabetes – High blood sugars feed bacteria, increasing the number of colonies in your mouth and throat. It also increases your risk of other types of infections including viral and fungal infections. Diabetes also reduces the body's immune system, worsening the frequency and severity of gum disease.
- Osteoporosis – Osteoporosis itself, separate from medication, causes bone loss and it is also linked with periodontal bone loss and tooth loss.
- Dementia – Cognitive decline makes it harder to maintain oral hygiene and patients are more likely to develop oral diseases.
- Cigarettes, e-cigarettes, cigars, pipes, marijuana and alcohol – All of these social activities increase the risk of oral and throat cancers, some through toxins and others through the HPV virus.
- HIV/AIDs – HIV infection impairs the body's immune system increasing the likelihood of infection throughout the body, including the mouth. People with HIV can develop viral ulcers, aphthous ulcers, fungal infections, more severe gum disease and tooth decay.
- Dry mouth – Many disease and medications... and Colorado weather can cause dry mouth. Diseases that decrease saliva include Sjogren's, Rheumatoid arthritis, certain cancers, and treatments include radiation to the head and neck, decongestants, antihistamines, painkillers, diuretics. Without saliva to wash away bacteria and bits of food, and neutralize the acid produced by bacteria, oral disease can worsen.
- Pregnancy – Changes in hormone levels during pregnancy can exaggerate some dental problems such as gum disease and cavities.
- Inhaled steroids – Inhaled steroid medications can lead to oral fungal infections.

Annual physicals and regular eye exams are important. So too are semi-annual dental visits. Take heed when the dentist, gently reminds you to maintain oral hygiene. They will likely tell you to brush your teeth at least twice a day with a soft- bristled brush using fluoride toothpaste. Floss daily and rinse your mouth after. Eat a healthy diet and limit food with added sugars. Avoid tobacco, marijuana and limit alcohol. Replace your toothbrush if the bristles start to splay.



Also, be sure your dentist has an updated medication list and knows your health history. With your help, your dentist can help prevent many health complications.

Yes, COVID-19 is still in the air. But don't neglect your health. We continue to see unnecessary complications from delays in care. While some delays have been unavoidable due to the decreased availability of elective procedures, try not to let the cavity turn into a root canal or the root canal turn into a tooth extraction because of delayed care. Get your cleanings and call your dentist if you notice:

- Gums that bleed during brushing and flossing
- Red, swollen, or tender gums
- Gums that have pulled away from your teeth
- Persistent bad breath
- Pus between your teeth and gums
- Loose or Separating teeth
- A change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite
- A change in the fit of partial dentures or dentures.