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A Look Into Oral Health and Your Overall Health: Why It's Important

by Sarah Carpenter

Did you know that more than 6 billion bacteria — including 700 different species — live in your mouth? Some promote health while others provoke disease. Oral health is vital to an individual's overall health and well-being. [Studies have shown](#) that untreated oral diseases may increase the risk of adverse health conditions. People who report being in poor health versus good health also report lower oral health related quality of life.

Your oral health is a window to your overall health. Let's take a closer look at this connection and learn the reasons why oral health is so important for each of us.

The Connection Between Oral Health and Overall Health

[Oral health offers clues](#) about your overall health. Did you know that problems in your mouth can affect the rest of your body? Like other areas of the body, your mouth teems with bacteria — mostly harmless. However, your mouth is the entry point to your digestive and respiratory tracts, and some of these bacteria can cause disease. Normally, the body's natural defenses and good oral health care — such as daily brushing and flossing — keep bacteria under control. Without proper oral hygiene, however, bacteria can reach levels that might lead to oral infections such as tooth decay and gum disease. Certain medications including decongestants, antihistamines, painkillers, diuretics and antidepressants can reduce saliva flow. Saliva is important because it washes away food and neutralizes acids produced by bacteria in the mouth. It helps to protect you from microbes that multiply and lead to disease.

[Studies suggest that oral bacteria](#) and the inflammation associated with a severe form of gum disease (periodontitis) might play a role in some diseases. They also state that certain diseases such as diabetes and HIV/AIDS can lower the body's resistance to infection. This makes oral health problems more severe.

What Conditions Can Be Linked to Oral Health?

Research shows that bacteria that goes into your bloodstream from swollen, painful gums may affect many parts of your body — from your heart to your lungs. A prolonged state of inflammation in your

body isn't good. The quality of your oral health has an impact on various diseases and health conditions in your body.

Cardiovascular Disease

[Study after study](#) has shown that people who have poor oral health (such as gum disease or tooth loss) have higher rates of cardiovascular problems such as heart attack or stroke than people with good oral health. Although the connection is not fully understood, some research suggests that heart disease, clogged arteries and stroke might be linked to the inflammation and infections that oral bacteria can cause.

Pneumonia

Certain bacteria in your mouth can be pulled into your lungs causing pneumonia and other respiratory diseases. Pneumonia is the leading cause of death from infection in the elderly, and [studies have shown](#) that good oral hygiene can reduce mortality in frail elders.

Allergies

[While allergies themselves](#) don't damage teeth, they can indirectly cause mouth problems. One of the most common oral health concerns you might experience is dry mouth. It often appears as a side effect of the antihistamines used to treat allergies or as a result of more frequent mouth breathing that allergies might cause. Dry mouth decreases saliva, and it can damage teeth and gums. Saliva helps digest food, wash food particles off your teeth, neutralize cavity-causing acids from plaque and more. When you don't have enough, your risk for tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease increases.

Endocarditis

This infection of the inner lining of your heart chambers or valves (endocardium) is connected to oral health, as well. It typically occurs when bacteria or other germs from another part of your body (such as your mouth) spread through your bloodstream and attach to certain areas in your heart.

Pregnancy and Birth Complications

Periodontitis, a severe gum infection that can lead to tooth loss, has also been linked to premature birth and low birth weight. Bacteria from your mouth can [migrate from periodontal tissues](#) into blood circulation, stimulating inflammatory mediators, posing a threat to the fetal-placental unit and causing adverse pregnancy outcomes. Periodontitis is caused by bacteria that have been allowed to accumulate on your teeth and gums. It starts as inflammation and worsens over time.

The Connection Between Other Conditions and Your Oral Health

There are a number of other conditions that have a direct correlation to your oral health. The list is long, but it includes diabetes, HIV/AIDS, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's disease, eating disorders, rheumatoid arthritis, certain cancers and an immune system disorder that causes dry mouth (Sjogren's syndrome). People with these conditions can experience gum disease and worsening oral health as their diseases progress. Some medications, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs, can also damage your teeth and cause inflammation, bleeding or ulcers. Diseased gums can lead to other dental problems including tooth loss.

How to Protect Your Oral Health for Your Overall Health

To protect and promote good oral health for a healthy smile and a healthy body, it's important to practice good hygiene daily. Here are some action items for you to consider implementing.

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day for two minutes each time. Use a soft-bristled brush and fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss daily.
- Use mouthwash to remove food particles left after brushing and flossing.
- Eat a healthy diet and limit sugary food and drinks.
- Replace your toothbrush every three to four months, or sooner if bristles are splayed or worn.
- Schedule regular dental checkups and cleanings.
- Avoid smoking and vaping to lessen your risk of developing oral cancer and gum disease.

Get Your Oral Health Checkup at West Coast Dental

Your oral health truly is a window to your overall health. The mouth/body connection is clear. There are many reasons why oral health is so important for each of us. Not only for a healthy smile but for a healthy body.

How long has it been since your last dental checkup? We have dentistry experts to help you make sure your oral health stays in great shape. [Schedule an appointment](#) at West Coast Dental today.

Sarah Carpenter is a freelance writer whose portfolio spans the industries of health care, higher education and entertainment. Find out more at [her website](#).

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