



## THE MOUTH/EVERYTHING CONNECTION

Somehow, somewhere, long ago, we began to think of ourselves less as whole beings and more as a collection of parts. As doctors, psychologists, and dentists learned more and more about how our bodies, brains, and mouths worked individually, it seems we thought less and less about how those parts worked collectively. The tide is turning though, and we're remembering that we are all made up of a collection of intricately connected systems.

Take for instance the way that most people think about oral health - rarely and only if something starts hurting. The fact of the matter is that our mouths are far more than just the open end of the food tube. The health of our mouth, teeth, and gums has staggering impacts on the health of the rest of our body.

If plaque (a sticky mass of bacteria) builds up in the pockets between our gums and teeth, that bacteria can seep into the blood vessels in our mouth. The bacteria then travel through our entire body and causes inflammation everywhere.

**Heart** - The oral bacteria can attach to the walls of blood vessels and cause clots. If those get large enough, they can contribute to heart disease.

**Brain** - Just like vessels in the heart can be damaged, so can vessels in the brain. This can lead to an increased risk of stroke. Additionally, it appears that one of the types of bacteria commonly found in plaque may contribute to Alzheimer's.

**Bones** - As the plaque bacteria build up under the gums, they eat away at the bones of the jaw. This can lead to tooth loss since the teeth no longer have strong bones for an anchor.

**Lungs** - Oral bacteria can be breathed into the lungs and can lead to diseases such as pneumonia.

**Prostate** - The prostate secretes an enzyme called Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA). Usually, the prostate puts out very small amounts, but when it's inflamed, infected, or affected by cancer, PSA levels increase. Men with gum disease *and* inflamed prostates have higher PSA levels than do men with only one of those conditions. This indicates that prostate health and gum health impact each other.

**The on-going inflammation in the gums can have other ripple effects far beyond the mouth, such as:**

**Cancer** - Studies have found that men with gum disease were 54% more likely to develop pancreatic cancer, 49% more likely to develop kidney cancer, and 30% more likely to develop blood cancer.

**Diabetes** - There is a two-way relationship between oral health and diabetes. People with diabetes are more likely to contract infections in general, and that includes gum infections. Severe gum disease can cause increases in blood sugar that then increases the risk for diabetic complications.

**Pregnancy Complications** - Any infection during pregnancy is concerning, because it can pose a risk to the baby's health.

**Impotence** - The chronic inflammation that comes with gum disease can damage blood vessels, leading to impotence.

For more information, visit the American Academy of Periodontology at <https://www.perio.org/consumer/gum-disease.htm>

**ORAL HEALTH =  
HEALTH OF THE WHOLE PERSON**

**TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES CAN TAKE A LOT OF SUPPORT. WE'RE HERE TO HELP!  
ASK A NURSE OR PROVIDER IF YOU'D LIKE TO TALK.**



# SHOW YOUR MOUTH SOME LOVE!

**G**ood oral hygiene not only protects us from periodontal disease and its accompanying health issues, but it also protects us from dental caries (cavities).

Dental caries is actually an infectious disease caused by bacteria. They stick to our teeth and consume the sugars that are in the foods and beverages we ingest. The bacteria secrete an acid that dissolves the outside layer of our teeth. This is called “demineralization” and can eventually erode a hole in the tooth.

We can get rid of these tooth-dissolving bacteria by:

**Avoiding refined carbohydrates and acids** - It's important to be mindful of how often in a day that you're eating sugary or starchy (such as crackers, pretzels...) foods and how long those foods are left in contact with your teeth. Each time you consume those or drink sugary beverages (even juice), it gives the bacteria a chance to produce another dose of acid. Try to keep the “sugar hits” to four or fewer in a day. Watch out for beverages such as sports drinks and pop. They contain both sugar and acid!

**Floss First.** Bacteria love to hide in the crevices between teeth, and the only way to remove them is to go in there and scrape them out. Gently moving the floss all the way up and down on both sides of the tooth will help knock them loose. Then you can...

**Brush Thoroughly.** Electric toothbrushes are more efficient than manual ones, but the important thing is to get busy brushing. Choose a smaller head to get in smaller spaces and avoid hard bristles. Brushing doesn't have to hurt to help. Thirty seconds in each quadrant of the mouth, for a total of 2 minutes, is all it takes to keep the bacteria in check. Do this at least twice a day - after breakfast and before bed. After every meal is even better, but if you can't get to a brush, at least rinse your mouth out with water.

**Use a toothpaste with fluoride.** Fluoride is a mineral that helps kill harmful bacteria, re-mineralize teeth, and strengthen tooth enamel. After brushing - DON'T RINSE! Let the fluoride sit and do its thing, especially when you're headed off to bed. That gives the fluoride all night to work.

**Try experimenting with “disclosing” tablets or rinse.** They can make sure that you're fully cleaning your teeth. The bacteria-laden plaque that sticks to our teeth can be hard to see. Disclosing tablets or rinse will turn it a different color, so you can make sure you haven't missed any spots.

**Get a check-up at least twice a year.** There is some mouth gunk that you just can't remove with flossing and brushing. Calculus (also called tartar) is hardened plaque that can only be removed by a dental professional using cleaning tools. The longer you go between cleanings, the more difficult it is to remove. Some people just naturally make more plaque, so you might have to have it removed more frequently than every six months.

**Dental myth-information can cause lasting damage to our oral health. Here are a few myths that we can bust.**

**Myth** - It's just a baby tooth. Those cavities don't matter.  
**Truth** - Since cavities are contagious, baby teeth can infect permanent teeth. It's possible for a brand-new permanent tooth to show up with a cavity! Cavities can also become infected and cause an abscess. That infection can then spread and cause meningitis - a type of brain infection. Additionally, if a baby tooth has a cavity and comes out before the permanent tooth is lined up correctly, it can cause permanent teeth to come in crooked. Start brushing a child's teeth as soon as they come in and start flossing as soon as the baby's teeth start touching. Starting at 12 months old, it's safe to use a tiny, infant-sized dab of fluoride toothpaste.

**Myth** - Bad breath may be embarrassing, but that's all.  
**Truth** - Bad breath or a constant bad taste in your mouth can be an indicator of oral disease. Regular check-ups with your dentist can help rule this out. If your mouth is healthy, but bad breath is still a problem, it could be an indication of a medical issue. Make an appointment with your primary care provider.

**Myth** - Bad teeth are just part of aging.  
**Truth** - Good oral hygiene can help you keep healthy teeth and gums as you get older. Dental care is important for everyone, of every age, throughout their whole life. Youth doesn't protect you from decay. You can keep those teeth!

**Myth** - Baking soda, salt, vinegar, lemon juice, or activated charcoal are good, natural whiteners for your teeth.  
**Truth** - They can all damage tooth enamel. It's kind of like trying to clean your car with sandpaper. It might work at first, but eventually, you're going to hit metal. Stick with a fluoride toothpaste that has the American Dental Association seal of approval. That's your assurance that it's safe and effective.

**To learn more, visit [www.https://www.mouthhealthy.org](https://www.mouthhealthy.org).**