

Diabetes and Oral Health

What is Diabetes?

Diabetes is a chronic disease that leads to an elevation of blood sugar. There are two types of diabetes. They are:

Type 1:

- usually occurs in people younger than 30
- no insulin is produced
- this person needs daily insulin injections

Type 2:

- not enough insulin is produced or the body cannot use insulin properly
- risk of diabetes increases with age, inactivity and increased body weight
- can be controlled by diet and/or drug intervention and physical activity
- it may be delayed by a healthy lifestyle

Is there a link between diabetes and oral health?

It is known that diabetes can damage and affect your eyes, nerves, kidneys, heart and other important systems in the body. People with diabetes have a higher risk of developing gum diseases and oral infections.

How does gum disease develop?

When plaque grows along the gum line and it is not removed on a daily basis, the gums become red and inflamed. The gums may bleed easily when brushing, flossing or eating. These are signs of gingivitis. If gingivitis is left untreated, it can develop into periodontal (gum) disease.

Periodontal disease affects the gums as well as the surrounding bone. When plaque builds up and hardens under the gum line, it is called calculus (tartar). When calculus is not removed, the gums pull away from the teeth forming 'pockets' of infection. This infection leads to bone loss and if enough bone is lost, the tooth can become loose and fall out. Diabetes causes the blood vessels to thicken, slowing the flow of nutrients and the removal of harmful wastes. This can weaken the resistance of the gum and bone tissue to infection. Daily oral hygiene is essential for anyone diagnosed with type 1 or type 2 diabetes.

What are other mouth problems for people with diabetes?

Thrush - Thrush is a fungal infection that occurs in the mouth. People with diabetes may be more likely to get thrush because a high sugar level in the saliva encourages the fungus to grow. Good diabetic control, no tobacco use (smoking, spit tobacco), daily oral hygiene and removal of and cleaning of dentures daily can help prevent thrush.

Dry Mouth – Dry mouth is often a symptom of undetected and untreated diabetes and can cause an uncomfortable feeling in the mouth. When there is not enough moisture in the mouth, ulcers, infections, soreness, increased plaque and tooth decay could result. An artificial saliva product may help the mouth feel moist.

Infections – Oral infections of any kind can be serious as they make it difficult to control blood sugar levels. Oral infections may make chewing painful and difficult causing a person with diabetes to select foods that are easier to chew, but not nutritionally appropriate.

How should people with diabetes care for their teeth and gums?

Daily brushing and flossing are required to help the mouth stay healthy. Use fluoridated toothpaste and a soft bristled toothbrush. It is important for people with diabetes to preserve their healthy natural teeth and gums.

What about denture care?

People with diabetes may have a lowered resistance to infection and delayed healing. It is important for people wearing dentures to make sure that dentures fit well. If the dentures do not fit well or if your gums are sore, an oral health professional should be contacted.

Protection for teeth and gums

Good blood sugar control is the best way to prevent gum disease and oral infections. Regular dental checkups are necessary to find problems early when treatment can be most effective. People with diabetes should have dental checkups every six months or as recommended by their oral health professional.

For further information, contact the oral health professional in your area.

Brushing

Angle brush towards gums. Gently brush back and forth with short vibrating strokes on all sides of your teeth.

Flossing

Wrap floss around middle fingers (use about 1/2 meter). Gently floss between the teeth and under the gums. Move up and down, then move to the next tooth.

