

The Mouth-Body Connection: Why the Dental Team is Essential for your Overall Health

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INTRODUCTION

Your mouth is important! You use it every day to talk, eat and breathe. Seeing the dentist regularly can not only help your oral health, but also the health of your whole body. Dentists can check if there are any early signs of health problems and can intervene before pain or disease develops. When conditions are found early, treating the problem is often preventive and can delay its progression, preventing it from developing into something more complex.

You can look at the mouth to learn what's going on with the whole body. The dental team includes dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants. Dentists are special doctors for your mouth and teeth. Their dental training includes oral and whole-body science and care. Dental hygienists have special training in the health of your mouth and focus on dental exams, cleaning teeth, and talking to you about how to keep your mouth healthy. Dental assistants work closely with dentists during most clinical procedures. They also take x-rays, prepare rooms, and clean tools. The dental team, and especially dentists, are trained to know about systemic health and medicine, which is whole body health. They are experts on the mouth-body connection. They can help keep your mouth healthy, deal with tooth pain, and create the perfect smile.



HOW IS YOUR MOUTH CONNECTED TO YOUR BODY?

The mouth impacts the health of the whole body – and the health of the whole body also impacts the mouth. For example, many parts of the body have good and bad bacteria. The bad bacteria in your mouth can enter the blood through the gums. Once in the blood, bacteria can be carried to places in your body far from your mouth. If the bacteria travel to the heart, they can cause inflammation or swelling to the inner lining of the heart, a disease called endocarditis. Any redness or swelling in the mouth can put a stress on the body because it can increase the body's overall swelling. If your dentist finds swelling, the dental team can help treat it. For example, a dental hygienist can clean your teeth to get rid of bad bacteria. This will help the mouth and the whole body be healthy.

At the same time, medical issues that are not treated can lead to negative changes in the mouth. Diabetes and gum disease are common examples. People with diabetes often complain of dry mouth and are more likely to have cavities and oral infections such as periodontal disease. The dentist can tell if your diabetes is under control by looking at your mouth. Deep cleanings are also thought to help decrease blood sugar (A1C) levels, which helps control diabetes.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Tell your dentist if you notice any changes in your mouth which may include:
 - *White spots or patches, red changes or lesions, new lumps or growths, swollen gums, new or sudden bleeding, dry mouth, slow or late wound healing, change in taste, or worn-down teeth.*
- Visit the dentist 1-2 times a year.
- Update your dentist on any changes to your medical history, like a change in medicines.
- Tell your dentist about any new oral issues. See the list above for things to watch.
- Brush your teeth two times each day (morning and night) with fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss your teeth every day.

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HEALTH HISTORY

The dental team asks about your health background, or health history. This is because dentists are trained to connect the health of your whole body with the health of your mouth. Many people see the dentist more than the doctor. So, dentists play a big role in your general health.

CURRENT HEALTH

After the health history, the dentist often takes your blood pressure. Have you ever wondered why that happens in a dental office? Blood pressure tells the dental team a lot about your current health. For example, if your blood pressure is too high, it might mean that your body is not well enough to continue the exam or treatment. Some dental offices ask questions about things related to diabetes. They may also offer blood sugar and rapid HIV screening tests. All of this information is related to your mouth and helps the dentist get the right care for your whole body. If needed, they can suggest the right doctors to help with other health issues.

DENTAL EXAMS

To help prevent mouth and other health problems, dentists also do head and neck exams. These exams can help see if your body is showing signs of skin cancer, oral cancer, or obstructive sleep apnea. For example, the dentist might see tongue alterations or moles that show signs of change. The dentist can help you find a doctor focused on sleep issues or a dermatologist if you have any problems like these. Sending patients to the right doctor early on is key for the best result and easiest treatment.

Dentists also work with oncologists. The dental team can provide oral health screenings for cancer patients before cancer treatment. The treatment is easier if any dental needs are taken care of ahead of time. These needs could include deep cleanings, fillings, or extracting teeth. For example, you can reduce the risk of infection and bone death (osteonecrosis) if dental needs are fixed before starting radiation therapy. Also, dentists are good partners after cancer care too, because they can help with common oral side effects, like dry mouth and infection.

Among other doctors, dentists also work with pediatricians to check that normal growth and development is occurring. For example, at a child's dental visit, dentists can check for cavities, explore family cavity history, and ask about access to fluoride that can be in toothpaste or tap water. Dentists may also ask about what a child eats and how that can impact a child's dental health. Dentists and pediatricians work together to make sure kids are getting what they need.