

Diabetes and Your Oral Health

Affecting millions of Americans each year, diabetes is a big concern for both the medical and dental professions. Over the past two decades, there has been a 30 to 40 percent increase in diagnosed cases of diabetes, especially among overweight children and adolescents, as obesity is a major risk factor. But how can diabetes affect your oral health?

According to the Centers for Disease Control, diabetes is a disease in which blood glucose levels are above normal. Most of the food we eat is turned into glucose—or sugar—for our bodies to use for energy. The pancreas produces a hormone called insulin to help glucose absorb into the cells of our bodies. When you have diabetes, your body either doesn't make enough insulin or can't use its own insulin as well as it should. This causes sugar to build up in your blood.

Diabetes can cause serious health complications, including heart disease, blindness, kidney failure, and lower-extremity amputations, and is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States. Some classic signs of diabetes are excessive appetite, excessive thirst, and excessive urination, but the condition may also cause weight loss, irritability, drowsiness, and fatigue. Diabetes, as well as any other medical conditions, should be reported to your dental team so that proper care can be delivered.

When not controlled, diabetes can lead to a number of dental complications because the high glucose levels in saliva may help bacteria thrive in the mouth. Because diabetes reduces the body's resistance to infection, the body's tissues—including the gums—are likely to be affected. The most common and potentially harmful oral

health problems associated with diabetes are gingivitis, periodontitis, and rapid loss of the bone that supports the teeth. Periodontitis is often linked to the control of diabetes, according to the American Dental Association. Patients with inadequate blood sugar control appear to develop periodontitis more often and more severely, and they lose more teeth than do those who have good control of their diabetes.

Diabetes can also affect the amount of saliva in the mouth, leading to dry mouth and resulting in an increased risk for cavities. Diabetic patients may also experience recurrent canker sores, white patches on the cheeks, and fungal infections that may indicate poor glycemic control. Taste may also be altered in diabetic patients, which can make it difficult to maintain a proper diet. Another fairly common, but often misunderstood, sign is burning mouth syndrome, during which patients experience a scalding sensation in their mouth, including on the palate, lips, and/or tongue.

Patients with poorly controlled diabetes are at an increased risk of other complications, such as infections and reduced healing. This may make it necessary for them to take antibiotics prior to certain dental procedures, including oral surgery. For those patients taking insulin, it may be necessary for them to consult with their physician in order to increase the dosage in the case of an oral infection. It is also important for their dentist to know if they take insulin—as well as all medications they take regularly—because the use of local anesthetics can influence the effects of insulin and could result in hyperglycemia.

So, if you have diabetes, make sure you take care of your teeth and gums. You may require more frequent visits to the dentist and more rigorous follow-up treatments to ensure optimum dental health. To offset the greater risk of gingival and periodontal problems, it is vital to control your blood glucose levels and to brush and floss daily. Finally, seek regular dental care to help keep your mouth healthy and to obtain advice on how to manage your diabetes. 

