

Diabetes and Oral Health

Here's some not-so-sweet news: More than 30 million Americans (9.4% of the population) are reported to have diabetes, according to the American Diabetes Association and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As many as 1.5 million new cases are diagnosed every year, and what's more, 23.8% of people with diabetes do not even know that they have it. Diabetes is a chronic disease characterized by high blood glucose (sugar) levels resulting from defects in the body's ability to produce and/or use insulin. It can lead to serious health problems, including heart disease, blindness, kidney failure, leg or foot amputations, and, in extreme cases, death. And when not controlled, diabetes can also lead to a number of dental complications because the high glucose levels in saliva may help bacteria thrive in the mouth. If you have diabetes, it's important to maintain good oral hygiene and visit your dentist regularly to prevent periodontal disease and other health complications from developing.

BLOOD SUGAR CONTROL IS KEY

The most common and potentially harmful oral health problems for diabetics are gingivitis and periodontitis. Periodontitis is a more severe form of gum disease that occurs when the gums and bone supporting the teeth become seriously damaged, potentially resulting in tooth loss. Since diabetes reduces the body's resistance to infection, the body's tissues—including the gums—are likely to be affected. Periodontitis is often linked to how well people with diabetes control their disease; patients with inadequate control of their blood sugar appear to develop periodontitis more often and more severely—and lose more teeth—than those who control their diabetes. In fact, one in five cases of patients losing all teeth in the mouth is linked to diabetes, according to the American Dental Association.

As a result of high blood sugar levels and diabetes medications, the amount of saliva in the mouth is also affected, leading to dry mouth (xerostomia) and resulting in an increased risk for cavities. The extra sugar in

saliva, combined with less saliva to wash away food particles, can result in cavities. Dry mouth can be treated by increasing water intake, chewing sugarless gum, and eating healthy, crunchy foods (e.g., cruciferous vegetables like celery) that increase saliva flow.

Since diabetic patients are at an increased risk of infection, they may experience more frequent oral infections. These can include recurrent canker sores and oral thrush (candidiasis), which appears as a cottage cheese-like coating on the tongue and insides of the cheeks and is often accompanied by a foul taste. Thrush is a yeast infection resulting from the higher amount of sugar found in the saliva, and it is more common in people who wear dentures. Maintaining good oral hygiene by brushing and flossing regularly, and cleaning dentures daily if they are worn, can help keep the mouth bacteria-free and less susceptible to infections.

While diabetes is a chronic disease for which there is yet no cure, patients who properly manage their condition and avoid complications from the disease—including oral health issues—can live healthier lives. Controlling blood sugar, maintaining optimum oral health by brushing and flossing regularly, and visiting the dentist regularly can go a long way to help decrease the likelihood of developing diabetes-related oral health issues. People with diabetes may require more frequent visits to the dentist and more rigorous follow-up treatments (i.e., for treatment of gum disease) to ensure optimum oral health.



Five Tips to Ensure Oral Health for Diabetics

If you have diabetes, follow these tips to help maintain your oral health:

- Control your blood sugar levels. Use diabetes-related medications as directed, adopt a healthy diet, and exercise regularly. Good blood sugar control will also help your body fight any bacterial or fungal infections in your mouth and help relieve dry mouth caused by diabetes.
- Don't smoke.
- Denture wearers should be sure to clean their denture(s) each day.
- Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristle brush, and floss once a day.
- See your dentist for regular checkups.

Source: American Dental Association

