

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Oral Health and You

Most of us understand how vital diet and exercise can be to our health, but the importance of healthy gums and teeth are often not given the attention they deserve. The mouth is truly a gateway to the body and there is a strong connection between oral health and overall well-being. By understanding the connection between your mouth and body, and taking a few simple steps to keep your pearly whites sparkling, you'll help your whole body stay "smiling."

Healthy teeth, healthy body

Why is oral health so important? There are billions of bacteria floating around in our mouths and good oral care typically keeps this in check. But when harmful bacteria grow out of control, research shows they can move through your bloodstream and reach other parts of your body.

The connection between mouth woes and other health problems is real. While the jury may be undecided on the *why* and *how* big the correlation is, poor oral hygiene is linked to:

Cardiovascular disease. If you needed another reason to pick up the dental floss, consider your heart! While the why is still unclear, tooth plaque is linked to plaque found on the arteries of the heart. And bacteria in the blood stream are connected to blood clots, blocked arteries and inflammation of the heart and vessels.

Respiratory problems. Bacteria growing in your mouth can travel to your lungs causing infections like pneumonia or aggravating existing problems.

Diabetes. If you have diabetes you're at an increased risk for gum disease, tooth loss, dry mouth and other infections. Plus, poor oral health can make your diabetes harder to manage by increasing infections as well as raising your blood sugar and your body's demand for insulin, making oral health critical in controlling diabetes.

Pregnancy complications. Gum disease is linked to premature births and low-birth-weight infants, highlighting the importance of excellent oral health before and during pregnancy.

The mouth-body connection

The mouth is sometimes referred to as a "mirror" to the body. Your oral tissue is very responsive and often reacts to problems taking place elsewhere within your body. Many diseases can actually be diagnosed in the early stages through a routine dental exam or x-rays. Swollen gums, mouth ulcers, dry mouth etc. can be symptoms of other problems like diabetes, cancer, kidney disease, heart disease, AIDS and leukemia. In patients with osteoporosis, the teeth can actually be the first part of the body to show bone loss.

The connection between the mouth and body is so strong that—like blood and urine—saliva can be used to detect and manage disease.

Keeping your mouth (and body) happy

Having great teeth doesn't just mean a sparkling smile and soaring confidence. Make sure your smile is as healthy as possible and:

- Visit your dentist on a regular basis.
- Brush your teeth twice a day for at least two minutes.
- Floss everyday to remove pesky plaque between your teeth.

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- Use an anti-bacterial mouthwash.
- Avoid smoking and all tobacco products.
- Know your mouth so you can identify any problems and contact your dentist when you do.

Practicing good oral hygiene not only benefits your teeth but it will have a positive impact on your health as a whole. Make an investment in your health for now and for the future and give those pearly whites the daily attention they want, need and deserve.