

Dental Signs May Indicate Your Overall Health

Regular dental exams not only help decrease your risk of oral diseases, such as cavities and gum (periodontal) disease, but may also help to diagnose other, sometimes life-threatening, medical conditions. Your dentist is an important part of your healthcare team. Dentists are able to assess your overall oral health and may recognize symptoms of serious diseases, including diabetes and cancer, which often manifest as signs and symptoms inside your mouth. There are many diseases with oral manifestations that, in many cases, may first present in the mouth.

Diabetes

More than 25 million people in the United States suffer from diabetes. Diabetes is associated with high levels of blood sugar and is known to lower resistance to infection and increase the chance of the following:

- Gum disease, including gums that bleed easily or are tender and swollen
- Tooth decay
- Taste impairment
- Inflammatory skin disease
- Persistent bad breath
- Changes in teeth position

Additionally, patients with diabetes (especially those with dentures) are more likely to experience oral fungal infections, including thrush and oral candidiasis.

Oral Cancer

During your regularly scheduled dental check up, your dentist will also search for signs of oral cancer. Oral indicators of cancer include:

- Sores that bleed easily or do not heal
- Crusted, rough areas of skin

- Lumps or thick hard spots
- Red, brown, or white patches
- Changes in the lymph nodes or other tissues around the mouth and neck
- Tenderness or pain, numbness inside the mouth
- Changes in the way the teeth fit together

While dentists check all patients for these signs and symptoms, patients with a history of smoking, using smokeless tobacco, or drinking heavily are at an increased risk for developing oral cancer.

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, physically damage both your oral and overall health. These disorders, which include patterns of insufficient or excessive food intake, can rob the body of much needed vitamins and minerals. These vitamin and mineral deficiencies can present themselves orally. Without proper nutrition, the gums can lose their healthy pink color and become increasingly soft and tender, bleeding easily. Additionally, disorders that involve excessive vomiting, such as bulimia, can cause discoloration and erosion of the teeth through constant contact with stomach acid. Those with eating disorders may also experience:

- Swollen salivary glands
- Dry mouth
- Thin, sensitive teeth
- Loss of tooth enamel

Alcohol Use Disorders

Alcohol use disorders affect more than 17 million adults in the United States alone. In addition to causing irreparable



social and medical problems, alcohol use disorders can severely impact your oral health. Dentists treating patients with alcohol abuse problems may observe the following signs and symptoms:

- Tooth decay
- Tooth erosion
- Moderate to severe gingivitis (gum disease)
- Gum irregularities
- Poor dental hygiene

Be proactive about your oral health

Diseases that negatively impact your general health can also damage your teeth, gums, and mouth. Regularly scheduled dental exams allow dentists to detect or monitor these diseases. Patients should inform their dentists about all medical conditions they have or medicines they are taking, which may affect their oral health. Remember, maintaining a healthy body includes taking care of your oral health.