



## The Medical-Dental Connection

Regular dental checkups may tell dentists about your overall health

Recent articles in many medical and dental journals — including *Scientific American* and the *Journal of the American Dental Association* — have discussed mounting evidence supporting a connection between medical conditions and dental disease.

**Delta Dental is committed to promoting dental health and so continually reviews the current literature to remain in the forefront of providing benefits to its enrollees.**

Your mouth gives your dentist clues about your overall well-being and can point to signs of disease, chronic illness or health risks.

**Although seeing a dentist is no substitute for regular visits to a physician, regular dental checkups may tell dentists much about a patient's overall health, including whether or not he or she is developing a disease, such as oral cancer.**

## What patients can do

**Visiting a dentist regularly can help patients maintain their oral health. A dentist's exam can detect poor nutrition and hygiene and growth and development problems, as well as provide clues to a patient's overall well-being.**

For people who have regular oral examinations, their dentist may be the first health care provider to diagnose a health problem in its early stages.

**It is important for patients to provide their dentists with complete medical/dental histories and to inform dentists of any recent health developments, even if they seem unrelated to oral health. Dentist visits should not substitute for visits to a physician.**

Delta Dental is committed to providing dental plans that allow our enrollees to achieve optimal oral health. It is clear that oral health impacts overall health, and many medical conditions are integrally related to dental problems. Currently, we have policies consistent with research pertaining to dental implants and pregnancy and oral health.

## The oral-systemic health connection

*Scientific American* recently reported that current research indicates a strong relationship between oral health and a person's systemic health. "Systemic" refers to the involvement of many organs or systems of the whole body. It is well documented that a high percentage of diseases, health conditions and chronic disorders have an oral component such as swollen or bleeding gums, ulcers, dry mouth, bad breath, metallic taste and various other changes in the oral cavity. These systemic conditions include:

- **Pregnancy**
- **Diabetes**
- **Cancer**
- **Heart disease**
- **Kidney disease**

### Pregnancy

During pregnancy, hormonal changes may result in gingivitis, or inflammation of the gums. Symptoms include tenderness, swelling and bleeding of the gums. Without proper care, gum (periodontal) problems may become more serious.

***The New England Journal of Medicine* (Nov. 2006) cited that there may be a positive correlation between gum disease and preterm deliveries and/or low birth weight. It remains unknown whether treatment of gum disease significantly improves pregnancy outcomes.**

What we do know is that preventive dental care is safe during most of the pregnancy. We also know that preventive care improves oral health and overall health.

**As the evidence points toward additional treatment being beneficial for both the mother and the unborn child, Delta Dental is introducing enhanced cleaning and periodontal benefits for pregnant enrollees to proactively promote oral health.**

### Diabetes

According to the American Academy of Periodontology, people with diabetes are more likely to have gum disease than people without diabetes. Researchers think this is because diabetes reduces the body's resistance to infection. The gums are among the tissues likely to be affected.

**Gum disease is often linked to the control of diabetes. For example, patients with poorly controlled type 2 diabetes appear more likely to develop gum disease than patients who have good control of their diabetes.**

## Other medical conditions

There are more than 120 medical conditions, many of them life-threatening, that can be detected in the early stages by your dentist. In addition to those mentioned in this brochure, the following are some of the more common concerns:

- **Thyroid problems**
- **High blood pressure**
- **Asthma**
- **Sleep and breathing disorders**
- **Skin rashes**
- **Bruxism (teeth grinding)**
- **HIV**
- **Tuberculosis**
- **Drug abuse**
- **Anorexia**
- **Digestive disorders**

Maintenance of good oral health through regular dental visits and appropriate treatment of gum problems are critical for diabetic patients, and coverage for these services is available through standard Delta Dental plan benefits.

## Cancer

As part of a routine dental exam, the dentist screens patients for cancer of the head and neck, including oral cancers. Other types of cancers the dentist may recognize include skin cancer, cancer of the jaw bone and thyroid cancer. Early detection and intervention are key in treatment of the disease because some oral cancers have a high mortality rate.

## Heart disease

Studies have shown that people with moderate or advanced gum disease had a greater prevalence of cardiovascular disease (CVD), including heart disease and stroke, than patients with no gum disease, gingivitis or early periodontitis. However, studies have not established a causal relationship between gum disease and CVD — a difficult task because many of the risk factors for gum disease are the same as those for CVD. These factors include smoking, poor diet and nutrition, diabetes, being male and a low socioeconomic status.

**Based upon current information, periodontal treatment is not warranted solely as a preventive measure against CVD. However, regular checkups and necessary treatment should be rendered to improve oral health, thereby contributing to overall health.**

## Kidney disease

When the kidneys do not function properly, the by-products of incomplete protein breakdown are released. A patient with kidney disease may have bad breath and may also notice an unpleasant taste in the mouth. Other signs are dry mouth and a metallic taste. With dry mouth, the amount of saliva is reduced and the normal cleansing effect of saliva is diminished. This allows bacteria to increase, potentially leading to the development of gingivitis and gum disease.

**Patients with kidney disease are considered an “at risk” population and are more prone to infections. Therefore, maintaining a healthy mouth is very important. These patients need to seek regular dental care and receive treatment individualized to their needs. This may include treatment of periodontal disease or replacing prematurely lost teeth. Treatment for these problems is available through standard Delta Dental plan benefits.**

## Some of the clues dentists look for

- **Upper respiratory disorders.** Viral infections in the lungs can produce lesions or sores inside the mouth.
- **Bulimia.** The persistent, induced vomiting of bulimia can cause a chemical erosion of tooth enamel and make teeth unpleasantly sensitive and more susceptible to fractures and decay. Often the patient will require significant treatment to restore the damaged teeth.
- **Acid reflux and hiatal hernia.** People who suffer from reflux experience repeated introduction of stomach acids into their mouth. This acidic bath can erode tooth enamel, resulting in sensitive teeth and a bitter taste.
- **Diabetes.** Inflammation, infections, dry mouth, a burning tongue, persistent gingivitis and multiple lesions can be indicators of diabetes. In determining the treatment needed for diabetic patients, the dentist reviews the patient’s control of the diabetic condition, medications the patient is taking and the oral health status. Some of the medications prescribed for diabetic patients can inhibit the ability to produce saliva, thereby reducing the cleansing effect of saliva that provides additional protection in the fight against cavities and gum disease.
- **Kidney failure.** In adults, dry mouth, bad breath, metallic taste and ulcers on the tongue and gums may be signs of poorly functioning kidneys.
- **Anemia.** Some of the earliest signs of anemia, a condition that prevents our bodies from producing sufficient oxygen-carrying red blood cells, are noted in the oral cavity. These signs include a burning and red tongue, inflamed mucous membranes and difficulty swallowing.
- **Osteoporosis.** With osteoporosis, bones become thinner and eroded. This is true of all bones in the body and may be visualized on dental x-rays, which are part of a standard initial examination and are conducted periodically at checkups.



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