

Oral health: A window to your overall health

Your oral health is more important than you may realize. Get the facts about how the health of your mouth, teeth and gums may affect your general health.

[By Mayo Clinic staff](#)

Did you know that your oral health can offer clues about your overall health? Or that problems in your mouth can affect the rest of your body? Understand the intimate connection between oral health and overall health and what you can do to protect yourself.

What's the connection between oral health and overall health?

Your mouth is teeming with bacteria — most of them harmless. Normally the body's natural defenses and good oral health care, such as daily brushing and flossing, can keep these bacteria under control. However, harmful bacteria can sometimes grow out of control and cause oral infections, such as tooth decay and gum disease. In addition, dental procedures, medications, or treatments that reduce saliva flow, disrupt the normal balance of bacteria in your mouth or breach the mouth's normal protective barriers may make it easier for bacteria to enter your bloodstream.

What conditions may be linked to oral health?

Your oral health may affect, be affected by or contribute to various diseases and conditions, including:

- **Endocarditis.** Gum disease and dental procedures that cut your gums may allow bacteria to enter your bloodstream. If you have a weak immune system or a damaged heart valve, this can cause infection in other parts of the body — such as an infection of the inner lining of the heart (endocarditis).
- **Cardiovascular disease.** Some research suggests that heart disease, clogged arteries and stroke may be linked to oral bacteria, possibly due to chronic inflammation from periodontitis — a severe form of gum disease.
- **Pregnancy and birth.** Gum disease has been linked to premature birth and low birth weight.
- **Diabetes.** Diabetes reduces the body's resistance to infection — putting the gums at risk. In addition, people who have inadequate blood sugar control may develop more-frequent and severe infections of the gums and the bone that holds teeth in place, and they may lose more

teeth than do people who have good blood sugar control.

- **HIV/AIDS.** Oral problems, such as painful mucosal lesions, are common in people who have HIV/AIDS.
- **Osteoporosis.** Osteoporosis — which causes bones to become weak and brittle — may be associated with periodontal bone loss and tooth loss.
- **Alzheimer's disease.** Tooth loss before age 35 may be a risk factor for Alzheimer's disease.
- **Other conditions.** Other conditions that may be linked to oral health include Sjogren's syndrome — an immune system disorder — and eating disorders.

Be sure to tell your dentist if you're taking any medications or have had any changes in your overall health — especially if you've had any recent illnesses or you have a chronic condition.

How can I protect my oral health?

To protect your oral health, resolve to practice good oral hygiene every day. For example:

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day.
- Replace your toothbrush every three to four months.
- Floss daily.
- Eat a healthy diet and limit between-meal snacks.
- Schedule regular dental checkups.

Also, watch for signs and symptoms of oral disease and contact your dentist as soon as a problem arises. Remember, taking care of your oral health is an investment in your overall health.