

It's Complicated: Diabetes and Your Dental Health

A recent study in the Journal of the American Dental Association found that one of five cases of total tooth loss in the United States is linked to diabetes. While complications are part of managing diabetes, for the nearly 26 million people in the U.S. living with the condition, tooth loss and other dental health problems are unlikely to be on their radar.

When it comes to diabetes and dental health, research suggests that the connection actually goes both ways. On the one hand, because of lowered resistance to infection and a longer healing process, gum disease appears to be more frequent and more severe among those with diabetes. On the other hand, it appears that treating gum disease in people with diabetes can actually help people improve control over their blood sugar levels.

"A dentist can be a valuable member of a diabetes health care team, along with a primary care provider and other health professionals," said Dr. Alice G. Boghosian, DDS, and an American Dental Association (ADA) consumer advisor.

The American Diabetes Association estimates 79 million people, or one in four, may have pre-diabetes, or blood glucose levels that are above average but not quite high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes. Additionally, of the nearly 26 million Americans with diabetes, about 7 million are still undiagnosed. With those figures in mind, regular health care checkups should be a priority, including dental visits that may help to identify potential signs of diabetes that appear in the mouth.

"In my practice, I've seen severely inflamed gums and cases of gum disease that have, together with a patient's medical history, prompted a discussion about whether there is a potential risk of diabetes," said Dr. Boghosian. "Oral health and overall health are connected, and as a dentist, it's my job to flag signs of poor oral health that also might signal other serious health conditions."

People with diabetes should make sure their dentist is aware of the condition, and together, create a personal oral care plan. Also, be sure to ask your dentist how you can check for signs of gum disease at home in-between dental check-ups.

Regardless of whether you have diabetes, practicing good oral care is essential to a healthy lifestyle. The American Dental Association urges you to make mouth healthy habits a priority. Be sure to:

- Brush for two minutes twice a day with fluoride toothpaste
- Floss daily
- Eat a healthy diet
- Visit your dentist regularly

For more information on diabetes and oral health, please visit mouthhealthy.org.