

## Dental Health for Older Adults

### What Your Mouth Says About Your Health

By Barbara Brody | October 11, 2017

**If you're not taking good care of your teeth and gums, you're putting yourself at risk for serious illness.**



*SilverSneakers Dental Health*

People have been telling you to brush, floss, and see your dentist regularly since childhood. But how seriously do you take oral health and hygiene, really?

It's not just about preventing cavities or flashing your pearly whites. Research is finding that a healthy mouth often equals a healthy body—and vice versa. So if you're not taking good care of your teeth and gums, you could be putting yourself at risk for serious conditions like heart disease and diabetes.

“A lot of good evidence has come out in the past five to 10 years showing important correlations

between your oral and overall health,” says Sally Cramm, D.D.S., a Washington, D.C.–based periodontist and spokesperson for the American Dental Association (ADA).

Most of the ties between oral and systemic health boil down to inflammation, Dr. Cramm explains. Inflammation is a reaction involving redness and swelling. It's not always a bad thing: It might simply mean that your immune system is doing its job of trying to fight off a harmful invader or infection. But when inflammation goes unchecked and becomes chronic, problems ensue. (Good news: Exercise can help tame inflammation, and you could have free access to gyms and exercise classes nationwide through SilverSneakers. Check your eligibility here.)

Chronic inflammation is, unfortunately, pretty common—especially in your mouth. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a whopping 47 percent of Americans 30 and older have gum disease, a condition in which the gums look red or swollen, and bleed easily. Among people 65 and older, that number jumps to 71 percent.

“Swelling and bleeding are not normal,” Dr. Cramm says. Gingivitis is the most common and mildest form. If your gums have started receding, you may have progressed to periodontitis, which is more advanced and difficult to treat.

### Gums and Heart: A Dangerous Connection

Periodontitis causes gum tissue to break down, which allows bacteria in your mouth to get into your bloodstream and travel throughout your body.

One major area of concern is the heart. Although the American Heart Association says there's not yet enough proof that gum disease can actually cause a heart attack, there's solid reason to believe

that it predisposes you to heart disease, Dr. Cramm says. “Inflammation in the mouth leads to inflammation in the arteries, which increases the risk of heart attack

Similarly, research has suggested that gum disease raises the risk of stroke, again perhaps because inflammation in an artery (in this case, a vessel to the brain instead of to the heart) develops a blockage.

“People who have an oral infection that doesn’t get treated are also at risk for diabetes, thanks to inflammation,” Dr. Cramm says. Gum disease might even be a risk factor for cancer; Cramm notes that the inflammation marker C-reactive protein is often higher in men with prostate cancer.

## **Is Your Breath Hiding Health Clues?**

While inflammation caused by gum disease may end up causing health problems elsewhere in your body, the reverse is also true: Some diseases that might seem to have little to do with your mouth can take a major toll on your teeth and gums.

Diabetes is a perfect example. “So many of my patients have poorly controlled diabetes, or they have diabetes but don’t know it,” Dr. Cramm says. As a result, they end up with abscesses in their mouths or gum disease that doesn’t improve despite the usual treatments, such as better at-home care and regular cleanings by a dentist.

Your breath could also be a tip-off that you have diabetes or that it’s not well controlled. “Fruity-smelling breath may indicate ketosis, which happens when your cells utilize fat instead of glucose for energy” because glucose gets stuck in your bloodstream, says Shilpi Agarwal, M.D., an integrative and family medicine physician in Washington, D.C.

In either case, if something about your oral health is off and your dentist can’t sort it out, it’s time to consult your primary care physician or internist. “If we’ve tried all the normal things and there’s still a problem,” Dr. Cramm says, “I tell patients we should have your physician do some blood work.”

## **How to Protect Yourself**

The main takeaway from all of this is that you need to see your dentist (as well as your doctor) for regular checkups. “Even if you brush and floss and nothing hurts, see your dentist twice a year,” Dr. Cramm says, adding that the majority of dental problems are preventable. “A lot of things could be going on under the gum that you can’t see, and if you wait for it to hurt, it’s going to cost you a lot more money and time in the dentist’s chair.”

Not only do you want to catch gum disease in its earliest stages, but your dentist can also check for cavities. “It’s a myth that cavities only occur in children,” Dr. Cramm says. “As people get older, we start to see a rise in cavities again.”

There are preventive steps you can take at home too. Your metabolism slows down as you age—and so do your salivary glands. “Saliva has enzymes that help kill bacteria and reduce acidity in the mouth,” Dr. Cramm says. Many seniors also take medications, such as blood pressure drugs and antidepressants, that tend to cause dry mouth. Watch out for these five sneaky signs you’re dehydrated.

Drinking a lot of water and using over-the-counter sprays or rinses can help keep your mouth moist. But try to avoid sucking on hard candies, which coat your teeth with sugar that bacteria thrive on.

Plus, brush twice a day—and make sure that you’re doing a good job. “Manipulating a toothbrush might not be as easy as you get older, especially if you have arthritis,” Dr. Cramm says. Simply switching from a manual to an electric model could make all the difference. You should also be doing something once per day to clean between your teeth, whether that’s flossing, using a water irrigation device, or other method. Ask your dentist if you need help choosing.

Find more info on keeping your mouth healthy after age 60 from the ADA here

- 

### **60-Second Solution: Do You Have S.A.D.?**