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The Connection between Oral and Physical Health

Oral health has been described as the window into your overall health. The connection between oral health and physical health begins as soon as you open your mouth. Problems in your mouth, like tooth fractures and gum (periodontal) disease, can indicate underlying health problems. Other health problems can even be caused by your oral health.

Your mouth is the entry point to your digestive and respiratory tracts. Your mouth is also the location of many bacteria, some of which can cause disease. The body's natural defenses and good oral health like brushing and flossing your teeth can help fight bacteria. This helps to prevent infections in the mouth including tooth decay and gum disease. Your saliva also plays an important role in fighting bacteria in your mouth. Saliva helps to wash away food and neutralizes acids produced by bacteria in your mouth.

A wide range of underlying health problems can affect your oral health. Diabetes can impact your body's ability to fight infections and lead to gum disease. For diabetes, some studies point to a reciprocal relationship between gum disease and diabetes. Treating and controlling diabetes can improve overall oral health while at the same time, treating periodontal disease can reduce the need for insulin.



“Problems can exist without a patient realizing it, so early intervention is the key,” said John N. Cucuras, DDS, Dental Director for the C. L. Brumback Primary Care Clinics. “That is why regular dental check-ups are so important to help prevent tooth decay, keep your teeth and gums healthy, and give your dental provider the opportunity to detect any chronic illnesses like diabetes.”

The bone weakening disease, osteoporosis, can lead to periodontal bone loss and tooth loss. Alzheimer's disease can lead to worsening oral health as the disease progresses. Other conditions can be linked to oral health as well, including rheumatoid arthritis, certain cancers, eating disorders and an immune system disorder that causes dry mouth, known as Sjogren's syndrome.

Poor oral health can contribute to several conditions. Endocarditis, the infection of the inner lining of your heart chambers and valves (endocardium) typically occurs when bacteria spreads through your bloodstream and attaches to certain areas of your heart. Those bacteria can come from your mouth.

Oral bacteria have also been linked to other cardiovascular diseases with some research suggesting that heart disease, clogged arteries and stroke might be linked to the inflammation and infections that oral bacteria can cause.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina School of Dentistry found that

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people with gum disease were twice as likely as others to die from a heart attack and three times as likely to have a stroke.

Oral bacteria have also been linked to pregnancy and birth complications with ties between periodontitis and premature birth and low birth weight. Bacteria that travels from the mouth to the lungs can cause pneumonia other respiratory diseases.

The diseases and health conditions that can lead to oral health problems, as well the conditions that poor oral health can cause in other parts of the body, highlight the importance of good oral hygiene. Everyone should focus on good oral health by following a few simple practices:

- Brush your teeth at least twice per day using a fluoride toothpaste
- Floss your teeth daily
- Use mouthwash to help remove food left behind after brushing and flossing
- Replace your toothbrush at least every 3 months
- Avoid using tobacco
- See your dentist for regular checkups and cleanings

Oral health is an essential part of staying healthy. From a dental perspective, a good oral hygiene routine will do wonders for your teeth, mouth, and smile. More importantly, practicing good oral hygiene should keep the rest of your body smiling as well.

If you and your family are interested in a dental check-up, the Health Care District's C. L. Brumback Primary Care Clinics are providing dental services at locations throughout Palm Beach County. Patients can call 561-642-1000 to schedule an appointment or visit www.brumbackclinics.org.

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