

## DIABETES AND ORAL HEALTH

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Proper oral hygiene is an essential part of living a healthy life. For those with diabetes, this is especially important to remember, as having elevated blood glucose could increase the risk for oral health problems. Fortunately, practicing dental hygiene and having good blood sugar regulation are the best combination to protect yourself from these complications.

### The Link

Why are people with diabetes more likely to suffer from oral health problems? This is because blood glucose regulation and oral health are closely associated. If blood glucose levels are continuously elevated, it can weaken the body's white blood cells. These white blood cells are the body's primary protection against bacterial infections in the mouth. It is also important to note that inflammation in the mouth can cause blood glucose levels to become elevated. Some specific complications that could occur include:

- **Tooth decay:** If blood glucose levels are unmanaged, not only is the amount of sugar in the blood high, but the amount of sugar in saliva is high as well. This can lead to bacteria growth that could cause tooth decay.
- **Dry mouth:** Ongoing high blood glucose levels can decrease saliva flow, causing dry mouth. Due to the lack of saliva, bacteria and food are not washed away as easily, and can increase the risk of tooth decay and infections.
- **Thrush:** This fungal infection of the mouth thrives on the high glucose levels in saliva if blood glucose is unmanaged.
- **Gum disease:** Dry mouth, bacteria, and plaque buildup over time can eventually lead to gum disease if left untreated. This infection of the gums can deteriorate the bones that hold teeth in place, which could lead to tooth loss.
- **Delayed healing:** Persistently high blood glucose levels can affect circulation, making it more difficult for the body to heal wounds from a dental treatment, surgery, or infection.



Proper oral hygiene is an essential part of living a healthy life.

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To decrease your risk for oral health complications, implement the following practices into your routine:

### Prioritize Your Dental Hygiene

- Brush your teeth twice daily for two minutes with a fluoride toothpaste and soft bristle brush to reduce wear on the enamel.
- Floss your teeth at least once daily or use a dental pick to remove food particles and prevent plaque buildup, which can lead to periodontal disease and tooth decay.
- Those who wear dentures should ensure that they fit properly and are cleaned daily to reduce the risk of infection developing.

## **If You Smoke, Quit**

Smoking is unhealthy not just for those with diabetes but for all people. For those with diabetes, the nicotine in cigarettes can increase blood glucose levels, making management more challenging. People with diabetes who smoke are also more likely to develop gum disease, which, as mentioned above, can make diabetes more difficult to manage. If you need help quitting, start by having a discussion with your doctor.

## **Consider Your Eating Habits**

- Avoid sweets and candies that have a sticky consistency, as these can cling to teeth, lead to decay, and cause blood glucose levels to rise.
- Beware of starchy foods such as soft bread and potato chips that can get stuck between teeth and cause decay.
- Limit carbonated soft drinks, as they contain ingredients that can wear away tooth enamel.
- Consume fiber-rich fruits, vegetables, and plain dairy products, as these are all part of a diabetes-friendly plate and promote a healthy mouth.
- Foods and drinks that contain fluoride are also beneficial for your smile because they strengthen enamel and make teeth more resistant to decay.
- Keep in mind that drinking alcohol can lead to dry mouth, which can increase the risk for certain oral health problems.

## **See Your Dentist Regularly**

All adults should have a dental cleaning at least twice per year. This is especially important for those diagnosed with diabetes. At each visit, be sure to let your dentist know that you have diabetes and about any changes in your oral health or diabetes management. Your blood glucose levels will make a difference in how you respond to dental treatments. You should also bring your list of medications to each dental appointment. This will help ensure that any new medications will not interfere with current medications.

## **Talk to Your Doctor**

If you struggle to stay within your target blood glucose ranges, it is important to inform your doctor. Diabetes self-management is fundamental to reducing your risk of oral health problems. Your doctor will review your medications, diet, physical activity level, and other lifestyle factors affecting your blood glucose levels. Also, consider asking your doctor about programs available to help you learn how to better self-manage your diabetes and gain support. Managed blood glucose levels and proper oral hygiene are the best combination to reduce your risk of oral health complications.

## **Resources:**

1. "Diabetes and Gum Disease: A Two-Way Street" *American Diabetes Association*. n.d. Web 4 Aug. 2023.
2. "Diabetes and Oral Health." *American Diabetes Association*. n.d. Web. 4 Aug. 2023.
3. "Oral Health." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. n.d. Web. 4 Aug. 2023.
4. "Oral Health Problems and Diabetes." *Cleveland Clinic*. n.d. Web. 4 Aug. 2023.
5. "Smoking and Diabetes." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. n.d. Web. 4 Aug. 2023.
6. "The Best and Worst Foods for Your Teeth." *University of Rochester Medical Center*. University of Rochester Medical Center Rochester, NY. n.d. Web. 4 Aug. 2023.

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