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HEALTH JOURNAL | DECEMBER 27, 2011

## If Your Teeth Could Talk ...

*The Mouth Offers Clues to Disorders and Disease; Dentists Could Play Larger Role in Patient Care*

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The eyes may be the window to the soul, but the mouth provides an even better view of the body as a whole.

Some of the earliest signs of diabetes, cancer, pregnancy, immune disorders, hormone imbalances and drug issues show up in the gums, teeth and tongue—sometimes long before a patient knows anything is wrong.



WSJ 'Personal Journal' Senior Editor Melinda Beck explains that one's teeth and gums hold a lot of details about the body's overall health. Also, don't be fooled by a bright set of pearly whites. Tom Gannam/AP Images for Crest and Oral-B

There's also growing evidence that oral health problems, particularly gum disease, can harm a patient's general health as well, raising the risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, pneumonia and pregnancy complications.

"We have lots of data showing a direct correlation between inflammation in the mouth and inflammation in the body," says Anthony Iacopino, director of the International Centre for Oral-Systemic

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2008. Recent studies also show that treating gum disease improves circulation, reduces inflammation and can even reduce the need for insulin in people with diabetes.

Such findings are fueling a push for dentists to play a greater role in patients' overall health. Some 20 million Americans—including 6% of children and 9% of adults—saw a dentist but not a doctor in 2008, according to a study in the American Journal of Public Health this month.

"It's an opportunity to tell a patient, 'You know, I'm concerned. I think you really need to see a primary care provider,' so you are moving in the direction of better health," says the study's lead researcher Shiela Strauss, co-director of statistics and data management for New York University's Colleges of Nursing and Dentistry.

## If Your Teeth Could Talk...

### An Oral History

A dental exam can reveal some telltale signs of broader health problems.

**Teeth**  
 Front teeth that are too white, many and health problems may be lurking unseen.  
 Naps of back molars, worn, flattened surfaces indicate stress-related clenching and grinding.  
 Back of upper front teeth where stomach acid has worn away enamel could indicate reflux.

**Gums**  
 Red, puffy and inflamed gums are common during pregnancy.  
 Ties and hemorrhages with spontaneous bleeding may indicate leukemia.  
 Periodontal disease, in which gums pull away from the teeth, can signal diabetes, cardiovascular problems and respiratory diseases.

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George Kivowitz, a restorative dentist with offices in Manhattan and Newtown, Pa., says he has spotted seven cases of cancer in 32 years of practice, as well as cases of bulimia, due to the telltale erosion of enamel on the back of the upper front teeth, and methamphetamine addiction. "We call it 'meth mouth,'" he says. "The outer surface of teeth just rot in a way that's like nothing else."

Some of the most distinctive problems come from uncontrolled diabetes, Dr. Kivowitz adds. "The gum tissue has a glistening, shiny look where it meets the teeth. It bleeds easily and pulls away from the bone—and it's all throughout the mouth."

An estimated six million Americans have diabetes but don't know it—and several studies suggest that dentists could help alert them. A 2009 study from New York University found that 93% of people who have periodontal disease are at risk for diabetes, according to the criteria established by American Diabetes Association.

It's not just that the same lifestyle habits contribute to both gum disease and high blood sugar; the two conditions exacerbate each other, experts say. Inflammation from infected gums makes it more difficult for people with diabetes to control their blood-sugar level, and high blood sugar accelerates tooth decay and gum disease, creating more inflammation.

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Diabetes also complicates dental-implant surgery, because it interferes with blood vessel formation and bone growth. "When you put a dental implant in, you rely on the healing process to cement it to the jaw, so

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says Ed Marcus, a periodontist in Yardley, Pa., who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University dental schools.

Dr. Marcus notes that about 50% of periodontal disease is genetic—and even young patients can have significant bone loss if they have an unusually high immune response to a small number of bacteria. Giving such patients a low dose of doxycycline daily can help modify the immune response. "It doesn't really control the bacteria, but it helps reduce the body's reaction," he says.

There's also growing evidence that the link between periodontal disease and cardiovascular problems isn't a coincidence either. Inflammation in the gums raises C-reactive protein, thought to be a culprit in heart disease.

"They've found oral bacteria in the plaques that block arteries. It's moved from a casual relationship to a risk factor," says Mark Wolff, chairman of the Department of Cariology and Comprehensive Care at NYU College of Dentistry.

Bacteria from the mouth can travel through the bloodstream and cause problems elsewhere, which is why people contemplating elective surgery are advised to have any needed dental work performed first.

The American Heart Association no longer recommends that people with mitral valve prolapse (in which heart valves close abnormally between beats) routinely take antibiotics before dental procedures, since it's now believed that oral bacteria enter the bloodstream all the time, from routine washing, brushing and chewing food.

But the American Heart Association, the American Medical Association and the American Orthopedic Association all urge people who have had a full joint replacement to take an antibiotic one hour before any dental visit for the rest of their lives to reduce the risk of post-surgical infections. "I have my guidelines taped to the door in my hygienists' room," Dr. Kivowitz says.

Dentists say they also need to stay up to date with all medications, supplements and over-the-counter drugs their patients are taking. Blood thinners can create excess bleeding in the mouth. Bisphosphonates, often prescribed for osteoporosis, can severely weaken jaw bones. Both should be stopped temporarily before oral surgery.

Antihypertensive drugs, calcium-channel blockers and some anti-inflammatory drugs can cause painful ulcerations of the gums. Many medications, from antidepressants to chemotherapy drugs, cause dry mouth, which can cause cavities to skyrocket, since saliva typically acts as a protective coating for teeth. Additional fluoride treatments can help.

Some proactive dentists have glucose monitors for another check on blood-sugar levels if they suspect diabetes. Some also take patients' blood pressure and hold off on invasive

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that dentists offer HIV testing, because some of the first symptoms appear in the mouth, including fungal infections and lesions. Dentists can do the HIV test with a simple mouth swab and get results in 20 minutes.

Breaking the bad news is often more difficult. "I went into oral surgery because I didn't think I would have to deliver that kind of news to patients," says Clifford Salm, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon in Manhattan who has found leukemia, lymphoma, AIDS and metastatic breast cancer after performing biopsies on suspicious spots. "It can be a difficult conversation," he says, "but most patients are very grateful."



Enlarge Image

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

### Don't Be Fooled by White, Shiny Teeth

A gleaming, white smile is a sign of a healthy mouth, right? Not necessarily.

"Whiteness and the health of your teeth are totally unrelated," says Mark Wolff, an associate dean at New York University College of Dentistry.

In fact, many dentists worry that people who whiten their teeth may have a false

sense of complacency, since their teeth can still be harboring tooth decay and serious gum disease.

Even people who have no cavities can still have inflamed and infected gums. It could be that their saliva is particularly protective of their tooth enamel, while their brushing and flossing habits, needed to keep gum tissues healthy, could be lax.

"I get these patients in their mid-30s who don't have cavities, so they haven't been to a dentist in 10 years. But they have full-blown periodontal disease," says George Kivowitz, a restorative dentist in Manhattan. "They are losing all the supporting structure, and I have to tell them that these gorgeous teeth will fall out of your head if we don't turn this around."

Using whitening products more often than recommended can erode some of the enamel and cause teeth to appear translucent. But whether that actually harms teeth is controversial. "No one has really shown that it's damaging, but no one knows the long-term results," says Dr. Marcus, the periodontist in Yardley, Pa.

Write to Melinda Beck at [HealthJournal@wsj.com](mailto:HealthJournal@wsj.com)

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