

Clean mouth = good health? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What's the connection between a clean or healthy mouth and good health? I keep seeing these ads and commercials saying that there is a link — what exactly is it?

Answer

Dear Reader,

A nice smile and fewer trips to the dentist aren't the only reasons to take care of your teeth — you can actually stay healthier, too. Although they may seem unrelated, oral health does play a role in overall health. Gum disease, known as periodontitis, may make you more at risk for other health problems, including chronic diseases such as heart disease and stroke. Studies examining the link between a healthy mouth and overall health have shown some interesting findings:

- Bacteria found in fatty deposits in arteries of stroke patients showed that 40 percent of this bacteria comes from the mouth.
- Bacteria from the mouth may mix with platelets and contribute to blood clots and heart disease.
- Excessive plaque buildup has been shown to be associated with higher risk for chronic lung disease.
- Diabetics who also have gum disease are more likely to have heart attacks than those without gum disease.
- Infections from gum disease could cause your blood sugar to rise, making the treatment of diabetes more difficult.
- Studies have shown that women with gum disease are approximately seven times likely to give birth prematurely to low-birth weight babies.

Keeping your mouth clean is important because bacteria in the mouth can lead to, or negatively influence the development of these diseases (in addition to negatively influencing your love life!). If bacteria are not removed by thorough cleaning and visits to a dentist, these bacteria can multiply and spread throughout the body. This is especially problematic for people with suppressed immune systems.

Poor oral health can also cause pain and affect a person's well being. The use of certain medications or consumption of alcohol to cope with pain can affect oral health because these factors, as well as smoking and eating sugary foods, are associated with dental problems. Poor overall health can contribute to poor eating habits that may influence nutritional intake, causing further oral health problems. Sounds like quite a cycle doesn't it?

As you can see, there are many ways that a clean mouth and overall health are related, so make it a priority to take care of your teeth and gums. The [American Dental Association](#) [2] has some good tips on how to keep your teeth and gums clean. It only takes a few minutes each day to take care of your oral health, but the overall benefits are worth it.

Keep smiling,

Alice!

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