
Diabetes and oral health

Summary

- People with diabetes have a higher risk of tooth and gum problems.
 - It is important to look after your oral health and control your blood glucose levels to prevent gum disease.
 - Visit your dentist regularly for advice about how to keep your teeth and gums healthy.
 - Quit smoking.
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People with diabetes who have irregular blood glucose levels have a higher risk of tooth problems and gum disease than people without diabetes. This is because they have lowered resistance to infection and may not heal as easily.

If you are living with diabetes, you need to pay particular attention to your oral health and dental care, as well as controlling your blood glucose levels. Visit your dentist regularly for advice about how to keep your teeth and gums healthy.

Diabetes is a common disease among Australians, affecting almost 1.5 million people (around 7.6 per cent of the population). The first signs and symptoms of diabetes can occur in the mouth, so paying attention to your oral health can also lead to earlier diagnosis and treatment.

The most common oral health problems affecting people with diabetes are:

- periodontal (gum) disease
- gum abscesses
- tooth decay
- fungal infections such as thrush
- lichen planus (an inflammatory, autoimmune skin condition)
- mouth ulcers
- taste disturbances
- a dry, burning mouth (low saliva levels).

Diabetes and periodontal (gum) disease

Periodontal (gum) disease is caused by an infection that destroys the bone surrounding and supporting your teeth. This bone holds your teeth into your jawbone and allows you to chew comfortably. Bacteria and food debris called dental plaque is essential for gum disease.

If left on teeth and gums, plaque hardens to form calculus or tartar. The plaque and calculus irritate the gums around teeth so they become red, swollen and bleed. As gum disease progresses, more bone is lost. Teeth become loose and may fall out by themselves or may need to be removed.

Gum disease is more common and more severe in people with suboptimal blood glucose levels. This is because they generally have lower resistance to infection and reduced healing capacity.

It is important to look after your oral health **and** control your blood glucose levels to prevent gum disease. It is a two-way street. Treating gum disease helps to improve blood glucose levels in people living with diabetes, and people with optimal blood glucose levels respond very well to dental treatment.

Symptoms of gum disease

Please see your dentist immediately if you notice any signs and symptoms of gum disease, including:

- red, swollen, tender, bleeding gums
- a persistent discharge (pus) coming from the gums
- gums that are loose and pull away from the teeth
- a bad taste or bad breath
- loose teeth – this can change the ‘feel’ of your bite when your teeth are placed together or may make dentures fit differently
- spaces opening up between your teeth.

Diabetes and tooth decay

With increased blood glucose levels, people living with diabetes may have more glucose in their saliva and very dry mouths. These conditions allow dental plaque to build up on teeth, which leads to tooth decay and cavities.

Dental plaque can be successfully removed by thoroughly cleaning your teeth and gums twice daily with a toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste. Use interdental cleaners or dental floss daily to clean between your teeth. Taking good care of your teeth prevents cavities and gum disease.

Diabetes and oral fungal infections

Oral thrush (candidiasis) is a fungal infection. It is caused by an overgrowth of the yeast, *Candida albicans*, which occurs naturally in the mouth. Some conditions caused by diabetes such as high glucose in saliva, poor resistance to infection and dry mouth (low saliva levels) can contribute to oral thrush.

Oral thrush causes white or red patches on the skin of the mouth, which can result in discomfort and ulcers. Good mouth hygiene and optimal blood glucose levels are critical to successfully treating oral thrush. Your dentist can treat this condition by prescribing antifungal medications.

Caring for your teeth and gums

If you are a person living with diabetes, and wish to prevent tooth and gum problems, it is advisable to:

- Follow your doctor’s advice about diet and medication to keep your blood glucose levels as close to optimal levels as possible.
- Thoroughly clean your teeth and gums twice a day with toothpaste that contains fluoride.
- Use dental floss or interdental cleaners every day to clean between your teeth.
- Visit your dentist regularly for advice about proper home care, early intervention and regular preventive maintenance visits to keep your teeth and gums healthy. Your dentist will want to know what your blood glucose levels are and what medications you are taking.
- Avoid having a dry mouth – drink plenty of water and chew sugar-free gum to stimulate saliva production.
- Don’t smoke – speak to your doctor or call Quitline Tel. 13 7848 (13 QUIT) for guidance and support.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your dentist or oral health care professional
- Diabetes educator
- Diabetes Australia Victoria Tel. 13 RISK (13 7475)
- Dental Health Services Victoria Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039
- Community dental clinics Tel. 1300 360 054 to find your local clinic
- The Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne:
 - General enquiries or to make an appointment Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (outside Melbourne metro) Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 5 pm.
 - Dental emergencies Tel. 1300 360 054 Monday to Friday 8.30 am to 9.15 pm, weekends and public holidays 9 am to 9.15 pm
- Australian Dental Association Tel. (03) 8825 4600
- Quitline Tel. 13 7848 (13 QUIT)

Things to remember

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- It is important to look after your oral health and control your blood glucose levels to prevent gum disease.
- Visit your dentist regularly for advice about how to keep your teeth and gums healthy.
- Quit smoking.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch

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