

# Beyond a Nice Smile

## Links Between Oral Health and Overall Health for Older Adults

Oral health is about more than just having a nice smile.

Oral health includes the health of the teeth and gums, and the ability to speak and chew comfortably. Common diseases that can affect our oral health include cavities, gum disease, and oral cancer. Oral health is linked to overall health, self-esteem, and quality of life in many ways you may not have realized.

### Medications

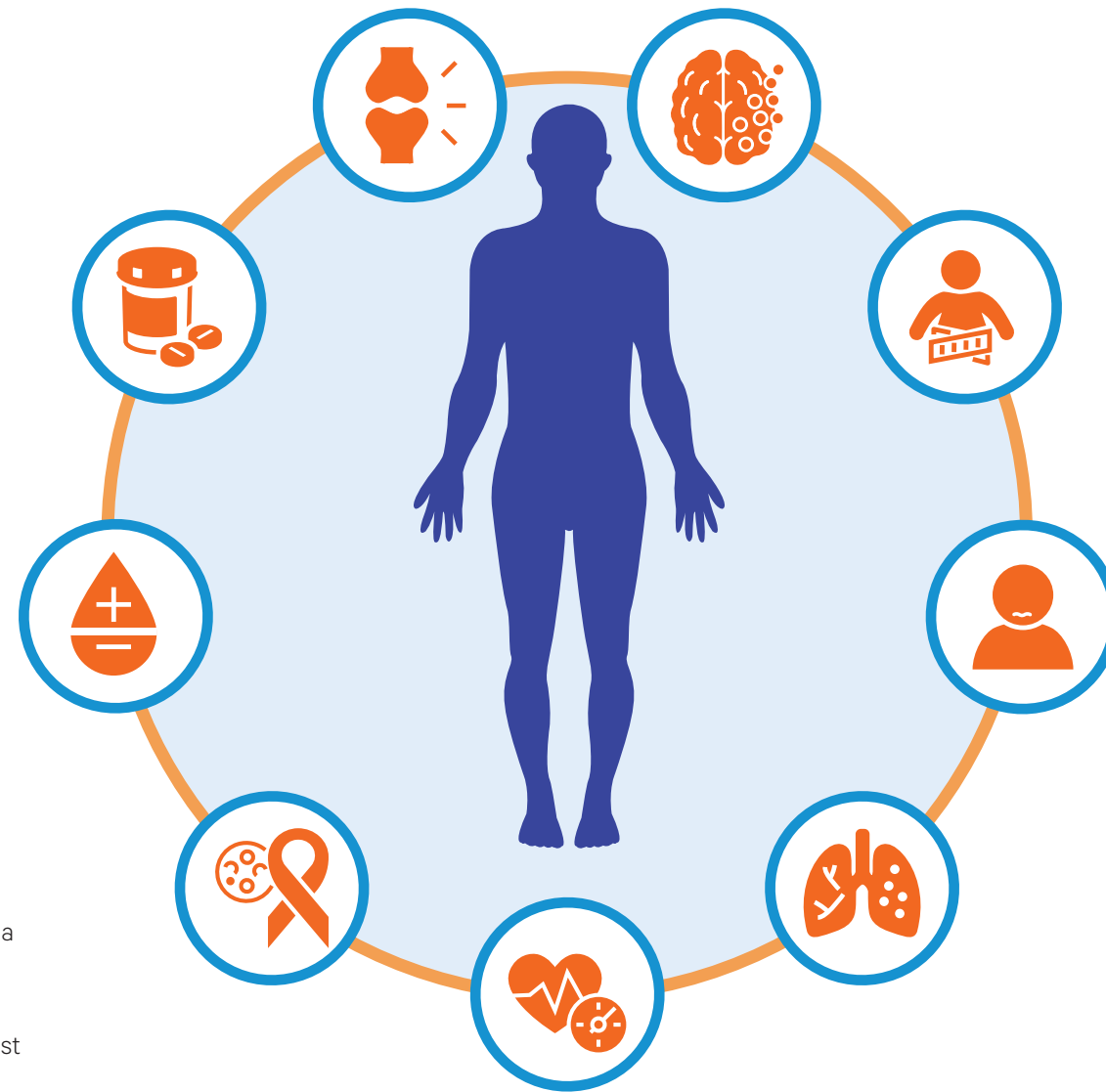
- More than four out of five older adults have at least one chronic health condition like heart disease or diabetes, and more than half have at least two chronic conditions.<sup>1</sup> Many medicines taken for chronic health conditions cause dry mouth, which often gets worse the more medicines people take.<sup>2</sup>
- Dry mouth, when not managed, can cause extensive tooth decay, leading to the need for more dental treatments like fillings, root canals, and extractions.<sup>3</sup> Dry mouth can also lead to oral infections and lesions, as well as difficulty chewing and swallowing, which in turn can result in poor nutrition.<sup>4</sup>

### Diabetes

- Having diabetes can raise the risk of developing gum disease by 86%, and people with diabetes often have worse gum disease than people without diabetes.<sup>5,6</sup>
- Untreated gum disease makes it harder for people with diabetes to manage their blood sugar (glucose) levels.<sup>7</sup>
- People who have diabetes and also wear dentures are likely to develop sores underneath their dentures because they do not heal as quickly.<sup>8</sup>
- Large-scale studies suggest that when people with diabetes are treated for gum disease, they have lower costs related to managing their diabetes.<sup>9</sup>

### Cancer

- Women with gum disease, and those missing teeth due to gum disease, have a greater risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer.<sup>10-13</sup>
- Men with gum disease have a higher risk of developing prostate cancer.<sup>14, 15</sup>
- People with poor oral hygiene from not brushing their teeth or visiting a dentist regularly have a greater risk of developing oral cancer.<sup>16-18</sup>



### Arthritis

- Having gum disease, including losing teeth due to gum disease, is linked with having rheumatoid arthritis.<sup>19-21</sup> Some studies suggest that the risk of rheumatoid arthritis increases with each tooth lost to gum disease.<sup>22, 23</sup>

### Dementia

- Having gum disease makes a person more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and memory loss.<sup>24</sup>
- Individuals who have lost teeth or have difficulty eating and swallowing have an increased risk of developing problems with their memory and thinking.<sup>25</sup>

### Obesity

- Some studies have found that individuals who brush their teeth once a day or less are more likely to become overweight or obese than people who brush their teeth more often.<sup>26</sup> There is also a link between being obese and having gum disease.<sup>27</sup>
- Eating sugary foods and drinking sugary drinks is linked to both being obese and developing tooth decay in children and adults.<sup>28, 29</sup>

### Mental Health

- About one in six adults aged 60 and older have some kind of mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.<sup>30</sup> Adults with depression are less likely to brush their teeth every day, more likely to have oral health problems, and less likely to see a dentist compared to adults without depression.<sup>31, 32</sup>
- People with depression often experience less energy and motivation to take care of their oral health, like brushing and flossing their teeth. Not brushing and flossing can lead to tooth decay and gum disease.<sup>33</sup>
- Medicines used to treat problems like depression and anxiety often cause dry mouth. If dry mouth is not treated and gets worse, it can cause tooth decay, oral lesions and infections, and difficulty eating.<sup>3, 4</sup>

### Healthy Breathing

- Having preventive dental care, such as teeth cleanings, before a stay in the hospital can help prevent developing pneumonia while in the hospital.<sup>34</sup>
- In elderly people, the risk of dying from pneumonia is decreased by improving the seniors' oral health through tooth brushing.<sup>35</sup>

### High Blood Pressure and Heart Disease

- Adults are more likely to develop high blood pressure if they have gum disease<sup>36</sup> or have lost teeth due to gum disease.<sup>37</sup>
- Some studies suggest that there is a link between gum disease and an increased risk of heart disease.<sup>38</sup>

### Recommendations

- Talk with your doctor about your oral health, including any problems you may be having with your teeth, mouth, or gums. If you do not have a dentist whom you see regularly, ask your doctor to recommend a dentist and options for affordable care.
- Ask your dentist about any oral health problems you may have, like gum disease, that may affect your overall health. Talk with your dentist about the best ways to take care of your oral health, such as brushing, flossing, or having dental cleanings more often.

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