Why Diabetics Need to Take Their Dental Health Seriously

by AFRA WILLMORE

Diabetes and Periodontal Disease

Diabetes is the gift that keeps on giving. Although, unfortunately, the gifts are usually an increased risk of developing other health conditions. Some are well-known, such as heart disease, but others are less talked about, like periodontal disease. So, what is the connection between diabetes and periodontal disease?

Periodontal disease in its mild form can be mildly annoying, but left untreated can progress quickly and has been linked to a higher risk of heart attack, kidney disease and stroke.

What is Periodontal Disease?

You may recall hearing mention of gum disease on those TV adverts where attractive dentists talk about what to do if you start spitting blood when you brush.

Periodontal disease is basically gum disease. Gum disease in its early stages is when gums may become swollen, red and occasionally bleed. It is also known as gingivitis. Most adults have some degree of gum disease. It can be painless, but this does not mean it is not serious.

Gum disease is caused by a buildup of plaque (a sticky substance containing bacteria) on the teeth which you can remove by brushing and flossing. Left on the teeth, plaque can irritate the gums and lead to gum disease. Quite simply, gum disease is one of the diseases caused by poor dental hygiene.

Left untreated, gums may pull away from the tooth, you may develop bad breath and teeth may become loose or even fall out; this is periodontal disease.

Symptoms you should look out for include increased redness of gums and even bleeding when you eat hard food (like apples) and floss or brush your teeth. Even if you wear dentures you can still develop gum disease.

You might not be able to guess that you have bad breath, but maybe loved ones will let you know. You may also have a metallic or a nasty taste in your mouth.

Your teeth and gums may start to look different. Often teeth look longer because the gum is pulling upwards and away from the tooth. You may notice pockets around your teeth, especially where gums are swollen. There may even be pus. Your teeth may start to feel loose or you may even lose teeth. The bone in your jaw may become damaged.

Some of these symptoms can be caused by other medical conditions — some people lose teeth during menopause for instance — but if you have one or more of these symptoms, you should take action.

There may be a connection between periodontal disease and heart disease as the former has been linked to an

increased risk of stroke, heart attacks, high blood pressure and narrowing of arteries. It can also make it difficult for those with diabetes to keep blood glucose levels stable.

The Relationship Between Periodontal Disease and Diabetes

The British Diabetes Association, Diabetes UK describes periodontal disease as a complication of diabetes. They have found that people with type 2 diabetes are three times more likely to develop dental problems, including gum disease, than those without diabetes.

Having high blood glucose levels can contribute to the development of periodontal disease. The sugar in your blood makes your saliva more sugary, making it the perfect breeding ground for harmful bacteria, creating acid, which attacks your teeth and gums.

High blood sugar levels can also damage blood vessels in your gums, making them more susceptible to damage and infection.

Unfortunately, even if you usually have good control over your blood glucose levels, gum disease can cause your blood sugar level to rise.

Preventing Periodontal Disease

Good oral care is at the heart of preventing gum disease, both gingivitis and periodontal.

Brush thoroughly twice a day and floss to keep damaging plaque off your gums and teeth. If you wear dentures, clean them regularly.

Visit your dentist and oral hygienist regularly. No one really looks forward to a spell in the big chair, but expert care and cleaning can go a long way to preventing or treating issues which could cause major health issues, or even death later on.

Worried about the cost? Many practices offer payment plans, some with 0% financing, so you can spread out the cost of treatment.

Think about what you eat and drink. Cut down on food and drinks with added sugar and be wary about items containing natural sugars, which can be just as damaging for your teeth and gums.

If you smoke, quitting can have a big impact on lowering your risk of gum disease causing extensive damage. Smoking lowers the efficiency of your immune system, making it more likely you will get a gum or bone infection. Smoking also makes it harder for damaged gums to heal.

Check your blood glucose levels regularly and don’t skip your appointments for your HbA1C, as results will give you a guide to how your lifestyle and eating habits are reflected in your blood glucose.

Even if your results are not great, they can act as motivation to do better, which will lower the risk of developing complications. It can affect your mobility, eyesight and general health.

Treatment for Periodontal Disease

Mild cases of gum disease can be reversed by regular and thorough brushing with a soft bristle toothbrush. Mouthwashes designed to treat gum issues may also help keep the area clean and remove bad bacteria.

If periodontal disease has progressed to a serious degree, your dentist and hygienist can work with you to remove the plaque and tartar from your teeth.

They may even suggest root planing, where the rough edges of your tooth root are planed (smoothed) to make it

harder for damaging bacteria to stick to it. This process may take a few visits, but you should be able to ask for a local anesthetic to help prevent any discomfort. After treatment is complete, your gums should heal and be able to reattach themselves to the new smooth surface.

It’s important to be as diligent with your daily oral care routine as you are with your blood sugar management.

Gum disease may be common, especially in those with diabetes, but it can lead to serious illness and complications. Luckily, with a good brushing and flossing routine and regular visits to your dental office, you should be able to keep it at bay.