

# Diabetes

## Tips for good oral health

**I**f you have diabetes, you are at greater risk of developing some oral health problems than are people who do not have diabetes. Diabetes increases your risk of developing periodontal (severe gum) diseases. Because diabetes lowers resistance to infection, you also are more prone to developing oral infections. Controlling blood glucose (blood sugar) levels can reduce the risk of these effects.

### PERIODONTAL DISEASES

When plaque is not removed regularly through brushing and cleaning between the teeth, bacteria in the plaque can cause the gums to become infected and pull away from the teeth, leading to periodontitis. If periodontal diseases are left untreated, they can cause the bone supporting your teeth to break down, eventually resulting in tooth loss.

It is not clear why, but periodontal diseases occur more often and can be more severe in people with diabetes. This seems to be especially true for those whose glucose levels are not well controlled. Some evidence also suggests that treating periodontal diseases might help improve blood sugar control. It is important to have healthy blood sugar levels, eat a well-balanced diet and practice good oral care.

In addition to good oral care at home, regular visits to the dentist are needed to prevent periodontal diseases. Plaque can harden into a rough porous deposit called “calculus” (tartar) that forms on the teeth above, along and below the gum line. Unless calculus is removed during a professional cleaning, it can trap plaque and food particles, increasing the risk of developing periodontal diseases.

See your dentist if you notice any of these symptoms of periodontal diseases: gums that bleed easily; red, swollen or tender gums; gums that seem to have pulled away from the teeth; pus between the teeth and gums when the gums are pressed; persistent bad breath or taste; permanent teeth that are loose or separating; any change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite; any change in the fit of partial dentures.

### FUNGAL INFECTIONS

Some types of fungi occur naturally in the mouth. A healthy immune system and regular oral hygiene usually keep these in check. However, people with

diabetes have compromised immune systems and may be prone to developing fungal infections.

Oral candidiasis, or thrush, is a fungal infection that occurs in the mouth. Thrush produces white or red patches that may be sore and can progress into ulcers. It may attack the tongue, causing a painful burning sensation, and it also can cause difficulty in swallowing. Thrush seems to occur more frequently among people who smoke, wear dentures or need to be treated often with antibiotics. High glucose levels also increase this risk.

If you develop a fungal infection, see your dentist. He or she may prescribe antifungal medications to treat the infection.

### TIPS FOR MAINTAINING A HEALTHY MOUTH

Maintaining good oral hygiene at home is critical to achieving a healthy mouth. Brush your teeth twice a day and clean between your teeth with dental floss or an interdental cleaner once a day. Look for products that display the ADA Seal of Acceptance, a symbol that the product is safe and effective when used as directed.

Regular visits to the dentist for checkups and professional cleanings are important. Tell your dentist that you have diabetes, noting whether it is well controlled, and let him or her know about any medications you are taking. Also, discuss any oral problems you may be having, including dry mouth.

To reduce your risk of developing fungal infections, maintain good control of your blood glucose levels. If you wear dentures, remove and clean them daily. Generally, it is not advisable to wear dentures around the clock because tissues that are covered constantly with denture material can become irritated.

If you smoke, stop. Smoking increases the risk of developing periodontitis and fungal infections, such as thrush.

Good oral care at home and regular visits to your dentist provide a solid foundation for maintaining a healthy smile. Talk with him or her about your current health status and any oral health concerns you may have. Together you can develop a personalized oral health plan. ■

Prepared by the American Dental Association (ADA) Division of Science. Copyright © 2010 American Dental Association. Unlike other portions of JADA, the print version of this page may be clipped and photocopied as a handout for patients without reprint permission from the ADA Publishing Division. Any other use, copying or distribution of this material, whether in printed or electronic form and including the copying and posting of this material on a Web site, is strictly prohibited without prior written consent of the ADA Publishing Division.

“For the Dental Patient” provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.