

# Oral health

---

## and diabetes

People with diabetes, regardless of their age, are at greater risk of developing gum disease than people who do not have diabetes.

Gum disease (or periodontal disease) is a bacterial infection in the mouth that will get steadily worse if not treated. It can cause your blood glucose levels to rise. It can also lead to tooth loss. However, there are several things you can do to protect yourself from gum disease.

### What are gingivitis and periodontitis?

#### Gingivitis

This is a common gum disease caused by bacteria in plaque, a sticky film of food, saliva and germs that forms on the teeth.

If plaque is not removed properly, it hardens into tartar that builds up under the gum line and can only be removed by your dentist.

The major symptom of gingivitis is inflamed gums that bleed, especially when brushing.

#### Periodontitis

If gingivitis is left untreated, it can lead to a more severe gum disease called periodontitis, an inflammation of the gums caused by infection.

Gums can come away from the teeth causing 'pockets' to form. Plaque and tartar can build up in these pockets and cannot be reached by brushing or with mouth washes. This infection can destroy the bone and ligaments surrounding the tooth, resulting in tooth loss.

**People with diabetes who often have high blood glucose levels are two to three times more likely to develop gum disease than those with well-controlled blood glucose levels.**

### How do high blood glucose levels affect my teeth and gums?

High blood glucose levels can cause:

- A narrowing of the blood vessels including those in the mouth which can reduce blood supply to the gums therefore increasing the risk of infection.
- A decrease in saliva causing a dry mouth. This can lead to an increase in the plaque and tartar build-up that causes gum disease. A dry mouth can also be caused by some common medicines.

If you have a dry mouth, discuss it with your doctor or pharmacist and ask about products that may help to treat it.

- A gathering of sugars in the gingival fluid (the fluid between the tooth and gums) which can increase your risk of developing dental cavities.
- Fungal mouth infections such as thrush. Thrush appears as white (sometimes red) patches in the mouth and on the tongue. These patches can get sore and turn into ulcers.

Well-controlled blood glucose levels help to avoid thrush. Not smoking and, if you have dentures, taking them out at night also help. See your doctor for treatment if thrush develops.

### Can gum disease affect my diabetes?

Some studies suggest that as gum disease is an infection, it can contribute to higher blood glucose levels. Professional treatment of gum disease, combined with regular brushing and flossing, will reduce infection and can help to improve blood glucose levels.

---

## What are the signs of gum disease?

Many people do not realise they have signs of gum disease and regular dental checkups may be the only way to detect them. Other people may experience:

- red, swollen, tender gums that bleed easily
- gums that have pulled away from the teeth
- bad breath
- pus between the teeth and gums
- loose teeth, teeth moving apart or a change in the fit of dentures

## How can I prevent gum disease?

### 1. Brushing and flossing

- Brush your teeth twice a day and floss once a day – ask your dentist to show you how.
- Use a small head, soft bristle toothbrush and replace it every four months (each change of season is a good reminder).
- If you have full or partial dentures, clean them daily and remove them each night before sleep.

### 2. Regular dental visits

- Visit your dentist at least once every six months to prevent minor problems becoming major ones.
- Professional cleaning helps remove tartar build-up in areas not reached with regular brushing and flossing.
- Remind your dentist you have diabetes at every visit.

### How can I prevent gum disease? (continued)

#### 3. Well controlled blood glucose levels

- Keeping your blood glucose levels within recommended targets (discuss this with your doctor or diabetes educator) will help reduce gum disease.

#### 4. Do not smoke

- If you smoke, you are four times more likely to develop gum disease than those who have never smoked. Quitting smoking reduces and gradually removes the harmful effects of smoking on your teeth and gums. Speak to your doctor or telephone QUIT line on 137 848.

**Gum disease is usually painless. You may not know you have it until some serious damage has already occurred. Regular check ups by your dentist are essential.**

### For more information about oral health and diabetes:

- Phone the Australian Dental Association on 02 9906 4412 or
- Check your telephone directory for your State Branch.

### Would you like to join Australia's leading diabetes organisation?

- Product discounts
- Educational literature
- Support groups
- Free magazines
- Dietary services
- Children's services

**For more information phone 1300 136 588**

**Website: [www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)**

**Multilingual information: [www.multilingualdiabetes.org.au](http://www.multilingualdiabetes.org.au)**

*The contents of this information sheet have been provided by Diabetes Australia. It was reviewed by Diabetes Australia's Health Care & Education Committee (HCEC) in November 2005 and is endorsed for publication until November 2007. Do not distribute after this date.*

Photocopying this publication in its original form is permitted for educational purposes only. Reproduction in any other form without the written permission of Diabetes Australia (National Publications Division) is prohibited.