

Family Dental Care Dr J. R. Bensimon



OVERALL HEALTH

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The Health of Your Mouth Mirrors Your Overall Health

Your mouth is a mirror that reflects your overall health and well-being, according to Donna E. Shalala in the Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health. It's also a key determinant of your nutritional status and your self-esteem. "Oral health means more than sound teeth. Oral health is integral to overall health," she said.

The report, which was the first that the U.S. Surgeon General has undertaken to assess the nation's oral health, is intended to "alert Americans to the full meaning of oral health and its importance to general health and well-being."

But what is oral health?

First of all, the word "oral" refers to the mouth, which includes not only the teeth and gums and their supportive tissues, but also the roof and the floor of the mouth (the hard and soft palate), the tongue, the lining of the mouth and the throat (called the mucosa), the lips, the salivary glands, the upper and lower jaws, and the chewing muscles. Oral health also involves the branches of the nervous system, the immune system and the vascular system (blood vessels) that serve this part of your body.

So consequently, oral health means more than just being free from cavities and gum disease. Oral health, the report states, means overall health in the tissues that "allow us to speak and smile; sigh and kiss; smell, taste, touch, chew and swallow; cry out in pain; and convey a world of feelings and emotions through facial expressions."

Oral health and overall health—an intricate interrelationship

The health of the oral tissues is indicative of the health of organs and systems throughout your body. Your dentist and other healthcare providers can gather an enormous amount of information about your overall health simply by examining these tissues.

- A thorough oral exam can uncover nutritional deficiencies, microbial infections, immune



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disorders and some forms of cancer.

- Clues to a disease can be discovered by analyzing saliva under a microscope.
- Facial nerves have counterparts elsewhere in the body.
- The jaw bones and jaw joint function like other musculoskeletal regions of the body.

Conversely, research is showing us that disease within the mouth—especially periodontal (gum) disease—is connected to ailments throughout the body. Infections in the mouth are a gateway for disease-causing bacteria to enter the bloodstream and provoke a number of diseases, including:

- Heart disease and stroke
- Respiratory infection
- Diabetes
- Stomach ulcers
- Low birth weight or premature births

The answer?

Decay (also called caries or cavities) and periodontal disease are the most common, widespread dental diseases. They're also the most preventable. Community prevention programs, such as fluoridated drinking water, dental hygiene instruction in schools, nutrition education, and tobacco cessation programs, save billions of dollars per year in public health costs, according to the report. And best of all, they help most people keep their natural teeth for a lifetime.

Source - *"Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General"*

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