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How Does Diabetes Affect Oral Health?

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It is estimated that up to 20 million people have diabetes, but only two-thirds of these individuals are diagnosed. Studies have shown that diabetics are more susceptible to the development of oral infections and periodontal (gum) disease than those who do not have diabetes. Oral infections tend to be more severe in diabetic patients than non-diabetic patients. And, diabetics who do not have good control over their blood sugar levels tend to have more oral health problems. These infections occur more often after puberty and in aging patients.

How are gum disease and diabetes related?

Because diabetes reduces the body's resistance to infection, the gums are at risk for gingivitis, an inflammation usually caused by the presence of bacteria in plaque. Plaque is the sticky film that accumulates on teeth both above and below the gum line. Without regular dental check-ups, gum disease may result if gingivitis is left untreated. It also can cause inflammation and destruction of tissues surrounding and supporting teeth, gums, bone and fibers that hold the gums to the teeth.

What other types of problems could I experience?

Diabetics may experience burning mouth syndrome and fungal infections, such as thrush and oral candidiasis. Dry mouth (xerostomia) also may develop, causing an increased incidence of decay. To prevent problems with bacterial infections in the mouth, your dentist may prescribe antibiotics, medicated mouth rinses and more frequent cleanings.

How can I stay healthy?

Make sure to take extra good care of your mouth and have dental infections treated immediately. Diabetics who receive good dental care and have good insulin control typically have a better chance at avoiding gum disease.

Diet and exercise may be the most important changes that diabetics can make to improve their quality of life and their oral health. Diabetic patients should be sure both their medical and dental care providers are aware of their medical history and periodontal status. To keep teeth and gums strong, diabetic patients should be aware of their blood sugar levels in addition to having their triglycerides and cholesterol levels checked on a regular basis. These may have a direct correlation on your chances of avoiding gum disease.

What is the best time to receive dental care?

If your blood sugar is not under control, talk with both your dentist and physician about receiving elective dental care. Dental procedures should be as short and as stress free as possible. Also make morning appointments because blood glucose levels tend to be under better control at this time of day. If you have a scheduled appointment, eat and take your medications as directed. See your dentist on a regular basis, keep him or her informed of your health status and keep your mouth in good health.

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