

# oral health & diabetes

**People with diabetes, regardless of their age, are at greater risk of developing gum disease than people who do not have diabetes. 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 managed diabetes. However, there are several things you can do to protect yourself from gum disease.**

## What is gum disease?

'Gum disease' describes a range of conditions that affect the supporting tissues of the teeth. The supporting tissues include the surface tissues of the gums, or gingiva, that can be seen in the mouth and the deeper tissues of the bone, root surface and the ligaments that connect the teeth to the bone. Gum disease is a reaction of your gums and supporting tissues to bacteria, or germs, on your teeth that can get steadily worse if not treated. This can cause your blood glucose levels to rise and may also lead to tooth loss.

## 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 or dental hygienist. 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 and underlying tissues caused by infection and the body's reaction to this 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. The body's immune response to the plaque may lead to the destruction of the bone and ligaments surrounding the teeth. This may result in loose teeth or even tooth loss.

**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 therefore essential.**



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## 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. Some people may experience:

- Red, swollen or 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.

## 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.

## How can I prevent gum disease?

### 1. Brushing and flossing

- Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste and clean between your teeth once a day with either floss or inter-dental toothbrushes— ask your dentist or dental hygienist to show you how.
- Use a small head, soft bristle toothbrush and replace it every three months – each change of season is a good reminder.

### 2. Regular dental visits

- Visit your dentist at least once every six months to prevent minor problems becoming major ones.
- Remind your dentist and dental hygienist that you have diabetes at every visit and advise them of your current blood glucose levels.
- Professional cleaning by your dentist or dental hygienist helps remove tartar build-up in areas not reached with regular brushing and cleaning between your teeth with floss or inter-dental toothbrushes.

### 3. Keeping blood glucose levels in the recommended target range

Keeping your blood glucose levels within targets recommended by your doctor or credentialled 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.

## 5. For people with diabetes who wear dentures

You are at risk of two main problems: fungal infections under the denture and poor healing from ulcers. To help prevent these problems:

- Maintain excellent oral hygiene of both your mouth and your denture.
- Clean your dentures every day and remove them at night before sleep to allow time for rest and healing.
- Poor fitting dentures should be attended to immediately to avoid trauma to the gums.
- Visit your dentist at least once a year to check for pressure spots and ensure the oral tissues are healthy.

## 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 and delaying healing.
- A decrease in saliva leading to a dry mouth. This can lead to an increase in the plaque and tartar build-up that causes gum disease. Saliva is very important for the health of your teeth and gums. A reduction in saliva can increase your risk of tooth decay. A dry mouth can also be caused by some common medicines.
- If you suffer from a dry mouth, speak to your dentist, doctor or pharmacist about how to best manage this condition and products that may help so you can maintain the health of your teeth and gums.
- The release of sugars in the gingival fluid, or fluid between the tooth and gums can increase your risk of developing tooth decay.
- Fungal mouth infections such as thrush are more common when blood glucose levels are raised. Thrush appears as white, and sometimes red, patches in the mouth and on the tongue. These patches can get sore and turn into ulcers. Keeping your blood glucose levels within the recommended target range helps to avoid thrush. Not smoking also helps. See your doctor or dentist for treatment if thrush develops.

## For more information

To find out more about oral health and diabetes, phone the Australian Dental Association on 1800 678 383 (or check your telephone directory for your State Branch).

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

- > Dietary services
- > Educational literature
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- > Support groups

For more information phone **1300 136 588** or visit your State/Territory Organisation's website:

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<b>NT</b>	<a href="http://www.healthylivingnt.org.au">www.healthylivingnt.org.au</a>	<b>QLD</b>	<a href="http://www.diabetesqueensland.org.au">www.diabetesqueensland.org.au</a>
<b>SA</b>	<a href="http://www.diabetessa.com.au">www.diabetessa.com.au</a>	<b>TAS</b>	<a href="http://www.diabetestas.com.au">www.diabetestas.com.au</a>
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