

# A healthier smile, a healthier you?

The Mouth Matters<sup>SM</sup>

Brushing your  
teeth may be more  
important than  
you think.



# Look beyond the smile

## A nice smile can brighten your appearance. But good dental health is important for other reasons.

Good dental health helps keep your mouth in better shape. That means fewer cavities, stronger teeth and less chance for periodontal — or gum — disease.

Importantly, good oral health is part of overall health and well-being. In fact, your mouth can be a window into many general health problems. At Aetna, we believe that visiting your dentist for preventive care is a great place to start.

## It's true — the mouth matters

Trusted groups, like the Columbia University College of Dental Medicine, have conducted clinical studies to understand the connection between infections in the mouth and their impact on other parts of the body. They have shown that taking care of your teeth and gums may be important to your overall health.

Many diseases and conditions are visible through the mouth. In fact, sometimes the first sign of a general health problem shows up in the mouth.<sup>1</sup> And a dental professional can spot signs of many of them.

As infections in the mouth may affect other parts of the body, this means good oral health has never been more important — or the potential advantages more clear!

## Watch your mouth — common dental conditions

### Gum disease

Many adults have some form of gum disease. If left untreated, gingivitis, an early form, can become a serious infection, destroying the gums and tissues surrounding the teeth.

Gum disease usually begins when bacteria that aren't properly removed during brushing and flossing inflame the gums.

Serious gum disease may not stop in the mouth. Bacteria may enter the bloodstream. There, they may complicate diseases in other parts of the body.

Research over the last five years suggests that serious gum disease, known as periodontitis, may be associated with many health problems. This is especially true if serious gum disease continues without treatment.<sup>2,3</sup>

Now, here's the good news. Researchers are discovering that a healthy mouth may be important to your overall health.<sup>2,3</sup>

## What an oral exam can help spot

- Infections
- Immune disorders
- Injuries
- Nutrition needs
- Some cancers

## What your dentist looks for:

- Anything unusual in the mouth tissues
- Gum diseases
- Cavities, restorations like crowns or bridges, and other tooth conditions

<sup>1</sup>MayoClinic.com. "Oral health: A window to your overall health." Available online at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/dental/DE00001>. Accessed May 2010.

<sup>2</sup>R.C. Williams, A.H. Barnett, N. Claffey, M. Davis, R. Gadsby, M. Kellett, G.Y.H. Lip, and S. Thackray. "The potential impact of periodontal disease on general health: a consensus view." *Current Medical Research and Opinion*, Vol. 24, No. 6, 2008, 1635-1643.

<sup>3</sup>Ira B. Lamster, Evanthia Lalla, Wenche S. Borgnakke and George W. Taylor. "The relationship between oral health and diabetes mellitus." *The Journal of the American Dental Association*, 2008;139:195-245. Accessed October 2008.



## Pregnancy

Pregnancy causes changes to the body. Sometimes it can cause changes in the mouth. This may affect your health and the health of your unborn baby.

Knowing what might happen is helpful.

- Serious gum disease. Serious gum disease, periodontitis, may produce a chemical in the body that may cause early labor. By visiting the dentist while pregnant, you can check on gum health. If you have a problem, treatment can begin right away.
- Pregnancy gingivitis. This condition is caused by pregnancy hormones. These hormones can make the gums red or swollen, even bleed. Your dentist can give you a home-care program to help control this condition.
- Morning sickness. If you get sick often, stomach acids can wear down tooth enamel. Your dentist can provide a fluoride mouth rinse to help fight the effects. Morning sickness also may cause appetite loss. This may lead to poor nutrition. A prescription vitamin or supplement can help.

## Diabetes

Diabetics are more likely to develop mouth and gum conditions than non-diabetics.<sup>4</sup> For some, bad breath or bleeding gums may be the first signs of diabetes.

Diabetics also may develop:

- Dry mouth, which may increase tooth decay
- Receding gums, especially if their diabetes is poorly managed

Treating the gums can help make diabetes easier to control.

## Heart health

Heart disease is the number-one cause of death for Americans. There are several theories as to how periodontitis may have an impact on heart health. One theory is that bacteria may enter the blood stream through the mouth and have the potential to attach to fatty deposits in the blood vessels, which may contribute to heart disease.<sup>2</sup> Another theory is that the inflammation associated with periodontitis may play a role.<sup>2</sup>

On a positive note, treatment may help. One study, published in the 2007 *New England Journal of Medicine*, found that treating severe gum disease can improve the function of the blood vessels.<sup>5</sup> In turn, this may help heart health.

## Oral cancer

Regular dental checkups also help detect signs of oral cancer early on. If a warning sign is found, a more complete examination is needed.

Your dentist may suggest a monthly self-exam. Find out how to do one properly during your next visit.

For more information, check: [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov); [www.adha.org/oralhealth](http://www.adha.org/oralhealth); or [www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/topics/cancer.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/topics/cancer.htm).

## Other conditions and diseases

We are always learning about new associations between oral health and overall health.

We'll continue to evaluate new studies and what they mean for you. You'll get information that can help you make better decisions about dental care and your overall health.

<sup>4</sup>Academy of General Dentistry. "Importance of Oral Health to Overall Health." Available online at <http://www.knowyourteeth.com/infobites/abc/article/?iid=320&aid=1289&chapt=1>. Accessed May 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Tonetti MS, D'Aiuto F, Nibali L, et al. "Treatment of Periodontitis and Endothelial Function." *The New England Journal of Medicine*. March 1, 2007;356:911.

## Making the mouth-body connection

When it comes to mouth matters, Aetna looks at the whole picture. For members with both an Aetna medical and dental benefits or insurance plan, we have your medical and dental information. We put this information together — then put it to work.

This lets us identify members who may have reason to be concerned about dental health and its effects. Our focus is on those who are pregnant or who have heart disease or diabetes.

We reach out, when appropriate, with information, resources and support. Our goal is to help you:

- Learn about dental health and its potential impact on the body
- Visit a dental professional regularly
- Take steps to avoid problems down the road
- Reach optimal health

## Top tips for a healthier mouth

- Brush twice a day with a toothpaste that contains fluoride and an antibacterial ingredient, and carries the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance
- Floss after brushing
- Stop smoking
- Eat nutritiously and exercise

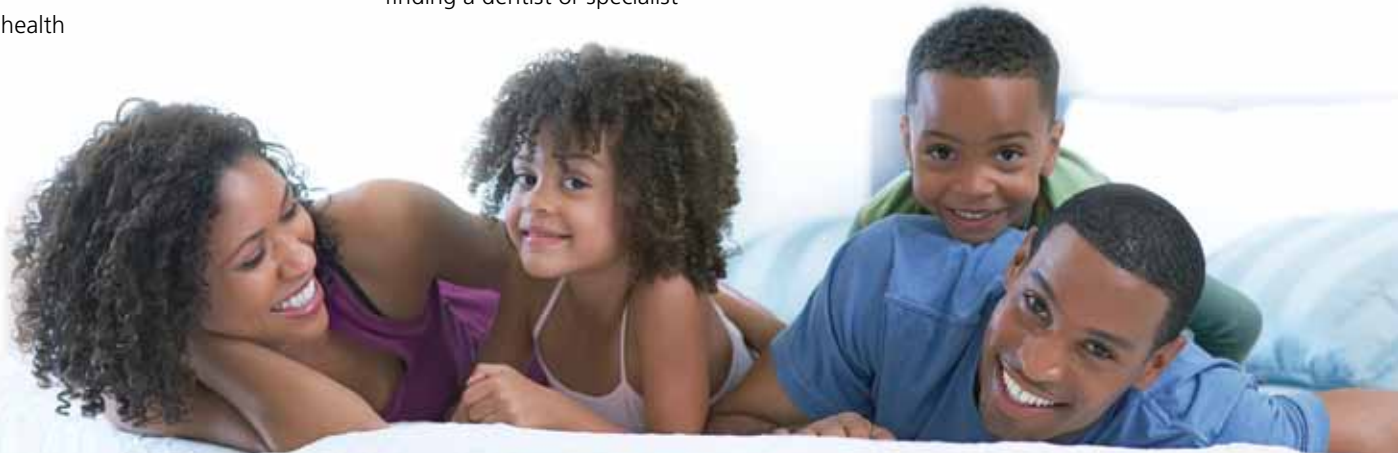
## Learn more on the web

Go to [www.aetna.com](http://www.aetna.com). You'll get tools and information, 24/7. Learn how to make smarter choices about dental care for you and your family.

- Simple Steps To Better Dental Health® — a dental information resource that includes a tool to find out if children are at risk for cavities
- Aetna Navigator® — your secure member website
- DocFind® — an online directory for finding a dentist or specialist

## Your good oral health and overall health can start today

The benefits of oral health are clear, so be sure to visit your dental professional regularly. Make an appointment now if you don't have one scheduled. To learn more, call Member Services at the toll-free number on your Member ID card.



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