

What Is Your Mouth Saying About You?

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It's about more than just your teeth.

Whether it's a cheerful postcard in the mail, a voice-mail on our home phone, or a text reminder of a scheduled appointment made almost six months ago, we all know we should visit our friendly neighborhood dentist at least twice a year.

Most patients think teeth cleaning is the only real reason we should go. But, your semi-annual trip to the dentist's office can be far more beneficial to your overall health than just getting your pearly whites polished.

The mouth has been described as a "window into the body," based on the clinician's ability to detect and diagnose many illnesses by simply paying close attention to what's found during a routine dental exam. Certain signs and symptoms can help your dentist and dental hygienist detect possible health issues: oral cancer or pre-cancerous lesions, vitamin deficiencies, gastric reflux disease, teeth grinding or even diabetes.

Early Detection Saves Lives

Despite great advances in diagnosis, treatment and recovery of nearly every other form of cancer, the five-year survival rate once an oral malignancy is detected remains at 50 percent. This disappointing prognosis can be attributed to the extensive lymphatic and blood supply in the mouth and surrounding area, making it easier for cancerous cells to metastasize.

Even if a dentist or hygienist detects an abnormality and treatment begins immediately, it's a coin flip's chance that the cancer has already spread to other parts of the body. Early detection is the key to giving a patient the best chance at winning this battle. And this detection can only occur if patients have expert eyes keeping watch over their mouth.

What to Look For

When patients ask us to look at a specific area they've recently noticed, we know we've done our job in raising awareness about oral health. We can't do this alone since most patients visit our office only twice a year, while you look at yourself in the mirror every day.

As a part of your daily oral hygiene routine, your dentist wants you to note any red, white or dark spots or patches that look odd or unusual to you. Generally, they'll disappear within 10 days to two weeks if they were caused by a traumatic injury.

But, if that blemish is still there after two weeks, it's time to get your dentist involved.

In some cases, your dentist will perform an OralCDX "brush biopsy" and send your swabbed cells to a laboratory for evaluation. This is a painless, non-invasive way to check that suspicious area and get results within a few days. For larger or more significant lesions, your dentist may elect to perform a scalpel biopsy or refer you to an oral surgeon. Either way, you're taking a proactive approach toward staying healthy and reducing your risk of oral cancer.

The Tongue Speaks Volumes

When it comes to our daily oral hygiene routine, most of us completely ignore our tongue. By failing to brush our tongue, we're missing a great opportunity to remove colonies of bacteria and food particles that lead to bad breath and illness. A white coating on the tongue can be a sign bacteria are multiplying beyond what's considered normal. Daily tongue cleansing with a toothbrush or a tongue scraper can help.

Another cause of a white coating on the tongue is *Candida albicans*, yeast fungi that normally lives in the mouth and our intestinal system without being visible or causing any problems. If it's present in abnormally large amounts, though, a patient's immune system may be compromised or she may be suffering from an immunity disorder.

Color and character of the tongue can also tell your dentist that you have a vitamin deficiency. The absence of taste buds and a smooth, bald, irritated appearance of the tongue may lead the dentist to recommend a vitamin B supplement.

Where Is the Wear?

From an early age, we all learn different ways to deal with the stress of daily life. Some of us deal with stress when we sleep by grinding our teeth. This habit—known as bruxism—can be identified by worn areas on the biting surfaces of our teeth or chipped edges of the enamel. Your dentist will recognize these signs and recommend a custom-made plastic night guard to help protect you from premature shortening of the teeth or even tooth loss.

A different form of "wear" can also be seen on the enamel on your teeth. Acid erosion from gastric reflux will cause thinning

of the enamel and loss of tooth structure surrounding fillings or dental work. Your dentist should then refer you to a gastrointestinal specialist to confirm this diagnosis and prescribe medication to help prevent further loss of tooth structure.

Diabetes and the Dental Office

Diabetes remains the leading cause of kidney failure, non-traumatic limb amputations, and new cases of blindness as well as one of the major causes of stroke and heart disease. Although there's no single symptom that can lead the dental team to a definitive diagnosis of diabetes, there are many signs that can help us guide a patient toward seeking medical advice that may lead to that important diagnosis.

The medical history you complete at your dentist's office likely includes questions about whether you suffer from increased appetite, thirst and frequent urination—the three main indicators of diabetes or a pre-diabetic condition. Evidence of gum disease has also been shown to correlate with undiagnosed diabetes.

An even more promising finding was suggested in a recent article in the *Journal of the American Dental Association*, calling for finger-prick blood testing of patient's hemoglobin (HbA1C) levels at dental practices. One study correctly predicted diabetes or pre-diabetes in 92 percent of patients who had four or more missing teeth, periodontal pockets of 5mm or deeper in a quarter of their gum sites, as well as high HbA1C levels. All this adds

up to an even better chance of discovering diabetes before its damaging effects can take hold.

So, the next time you visit your dental office for your cleaning and checkup, you'll know more about some of the signs and symptoms we're evaluating. But we still may ask you some questions while we have our hands in your mouth! ♦

Dr. Montgomery is senior partner at Chester County Family Dentistry in West Chester, where he's practiced for the past 20 years. He's a member of the ADA, the Academy of General Dentistry and is on staff in the West Chester Area School District. He's received numerous awards and has been named an area "Top Dentist." Check out his "Flossophy" at ChesterCountyFamilyDentistry.com.

