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# A Lifetime of Healthy Smiles Begins in Childhood

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# Oral Health

A WINDOW INTO YOUR OVERALL HEALTH

BY DR. SHOHREH SHARIF



*Dr Sharif, who has been practicing for 23 years, is a diplomate of the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry and an assistant professor at Howard University.*

Oral health is more relevant to sustaining one's general health than most people realize. The health of your mouth, teeth and gums, in fact, can critically affect overall health. Moreover, oral health often provides invaluable clues about your health in general—since problems in the mouth may certainly affect the rest of your body. Knowing more about the connection between oral health and one's health generally is not only common sense, but can help prevent illness.

*But what's the connection between oral health and your health in general?*

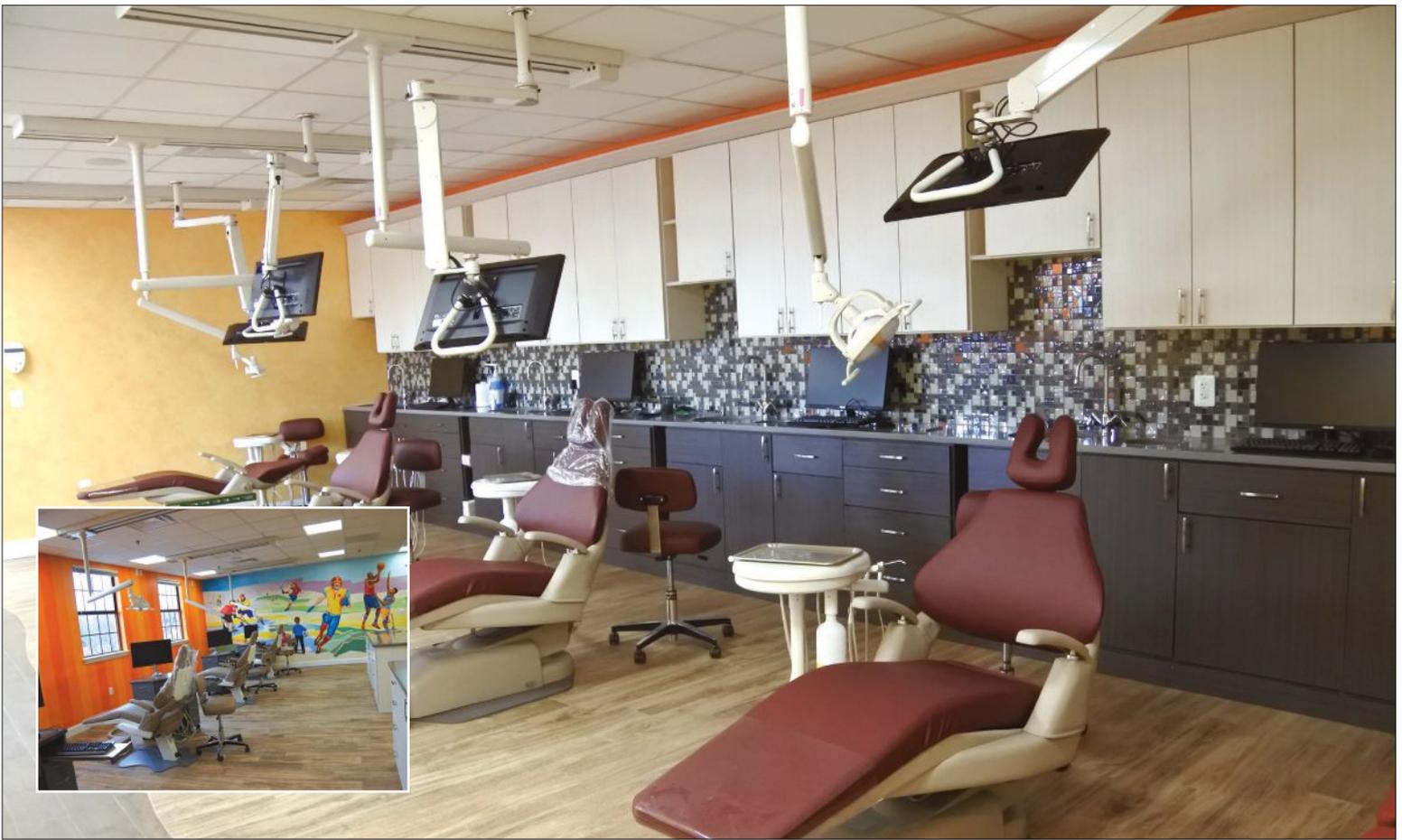
As with other areas of the body, your mouth teems with bacteria—this is mostly harmless. Still, the mouth is the entry point to your digestive and respiratory tracts, and some of bacteria commonly found in the mouth can cause disease.

Normally, the body's natural defenses—combined with good oral health care routines such as daily

brushing and flossing—keep bacteria under control. Without an appropriate oral hygiene regimen, however, bacteria may reach levels that cause oral infections such as tooth decay and gum disease.

Also, some medications—such as decongestants, antihistamines, painkillers, diuretics and antidepressants—can reduce saliva flow. Saliva's essential role in health-maintenance is to wash away food and neutralize acids in the mouth produced by bacteria. This natural process helps protect you from microbes that may otherwise multiply and cause disease.

Many clinical studies indicate that oral bacteria and the inflammation associated with severe gum disease (such as *periodontitis*) may even have a causative role in fostering some diseases. In fact, certain health problems—such as diabetes and HIV/AIDS—can actually lower the body's resistance to infection, aggravating already existing oral health issues.



What specific medical conditions may be linked to oral health?

The quality of one's oral health can contribute to a number of diseases and conditions, including:

- **Endocarditis.** This infection to the inner lining of heart chambers or valves (*endocardium*) typically occurs when bacteria—or germs from another part of your body such as your mouth—spread into the bloodstream and attach to vulnerable areas of the heart.

- **Cardiovascular disease.** Although this connection is not fully understood, some research suggests that heart disease, clogged arteries and stroke may be linked to the inflammation and infections that oral bacteria can cause

- **Pregnancy and birth complications.** Periodontitis has been linked to premature birth and low birth weight.

- **Pneumonia.** Some bacteria in your mouth can be pulled into the lungs, causing pneumonia and other respiratory diseases.

Other conditions which might affect your oral health include:

- **Diabetes.** By reducing the body's resistance to infection, diabetes puts gums at risk. Typically, gum disease appears more frequently and severely among people who have diabetes. Research reveals that people who have gum disease have a harder time controlling blood sugar levels. Regular periodontal care can improve diabetes control.

- **Osteoporosis.** This bone-weakening disease is

linked with periodontal bone loss and tooth loss. Certain drugs used to treat osteoporosis carry a small risk of damage to the bones of the jaw.

- **Alzheimer's disease.** Worsening oral health is often seen as Alzheimer's disease progresses.

Other conditions that might be linked to oral health include: eating disorders, rheumatoid arthritis, certain cancers and an immune system disorder that causes dry mouth (*Sjogren's syndrome*).

Always tell your dentist about the medications you take and about changes in your overall health, especially if you've recently been ill or you have a chronic condition such as diabetes.

Also:

- Protect your oral health by practicing daily oral hygiene

- Brush your teeth at least twice a day with a soft-bristled brush using fluoride toothpaste.

- Floss daily.

- Use mouthwash to remove food particles left after brushing and flossing.

- Eat a healthy diet and limit food with added sugars.

- Replace your toothbrush every three months or sooner if bristles are splayed or worn.

- Schedule regular dental checkups and cleanings.

- Avoid tobacco use.

Contact your dentist as soon as an oral health problem arises. Taking care of your oral health is an investment in your overall health.

*“Without an appropriate oral hygiene regimen bacteria may reach levels that cause oral infections such as tooth decay and gum disease.”*

—Dr. Shohreh Sharif

*Greater Washington Dentistry offers specialties in both pediatric dentistry and orthodontics in combination with general dentistry. Helping young people gain the awareness and skills needed to self-actualize a daily oral hygiene routine has long been one of the primary missions.*