Diabetes and dental health: keeping it fresh

Dental professionals can have a profound impact on patients with diabetes by communicating the need for excellent oral hygiene, says **Dawn Woodward**.¹

What does flossing and brushing have to do with diabetes? Well, quite a lot. Problems with teeth and gums are more common for people with the condition,¹ especially those with poor glycaemic control.

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It is therefore vital that those with diabetes brush up on the benefits of good dental care, and how to do it right, to prevent oral complications from the disease. This is where dental professionals can have a profound impact by communicating the need for excellent oral hygiene, and sharing effective preventive care techniques with their diabetic patients.

What is diabetes?

To recap, diabetes is a lifelong condition that causes a person's blood sugar level to become too high² and there are two main types – type 1 and type 2. Type 1 occurs where the body's

immune system attacks and destroys the cells that produce insulin, whilst type 2 occurs where the body does not produce enough insulin, or the body's cells do not react to insulin.

Spotting the signs of oral complications

While those affected by diabetes will know that the high blood sugar associated with the condition can affect the entire body, they may not be aware of the degree that it can impact their teeth and gums. Research shows that people with type 2 diabetes are around three times more likely to develop dental problems

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your patients to illustrate how they can effectively take charge of their oral health:

1. Continue to monitor blood sugar level

It is important to reinforce the rigorous monitoring of blood sugar with patients to reduce the risk of developing gingivitis and other dental problems. Additionally, aim to be aware of the patient's wider treatment plans and emphasise the importance of compliance to maintain good overall health.

2. Don't smoke

Advise patients that smoking increases the risk of various diabetic complications, including dental issues – from tooth staining and gum disease, to tooth loss and, in more severe cases, mouth cancer.⁴ You may also want to suggest they speak with their doctor to advise on options to help quit.

3. Schedule regular dentist appointments

Following standard advice, encourage patients to book a dentist appointment at least twice a year⁵ for professional cleanings and check-ups. This will encourage them to report any signs of periodontal disease or other dental issues so that they can be addressed as early as possible.

4. Carry out interdental cleaning at least once a day

Recommending daily interdental cleaning will help patients to eliminate cavity-causing plaque.⁶ Consider recommending a gentle yet effective interdental brush range, to keep plaque levels under control.

5. Brush teeth at least twice a day

It continues to be simple but important advice

for patients to brush at night and at least one other time in the day, for a full two minutes.⁶ Advise diabetic patients to avoid vigorous scrubbing, which can irritate their sensitive gums.

It's also helpful to suggest the right tools for the job so that patients can achieve optimum oral health. Besides a toothpaste that contains fluoride, consider recommending an ultra-soft-bristled toothbrush that is gentle on gums and teeth.

References

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<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-021-0646-4>

than people who don't have diabetes.³ People with type 1 diabetes are also more at risk.

Needless to say, communicating the early symptoms of diabetes-related dental health problems to patients is vital, so they know what signs to look out for, and ensure they receive prompt treatment. During their routine check-ups, educate patients on the extent of the complications they could experience with uncontrolled diabetes – including tooth decay, gingivitis, periodontitis, xerostomia, and tooth loss.³ If patients experience bad breath or redness/soreness in the mouth³ indicative of these conditions, it's important that they are encouraged to visit the dentist without delay.

Guiding patients to a healthy mouth

As you will know, there are a number of steps that diabetic patients can take to reduce the risk of dental issues later down the road, and maintain good oral hygiene. Here's a round-up of five top tips you can share with