



## Your Dental and Overall Health

*"The eyes may be the window to your soul, but for a look into your physical health, open wide:  
Your teeth and gums say a mouthful."<sup>a</sup>*



Did you know the first signs of a disease can be identified in your mouth? Infections in your mouth can cause problems in other areas of your body. Your dental health is a key contributor to your overall health and it is equally important to take care of your mouth as to take care of the rest of your body.

### What is the relationship between my mouth and the rest of my body?

Oral health and overall health are more connected than you might realize. Oral disease is like any other disease. Having an oral infection is a serious problem that you should not ignore. It can make your whole body sick.<sup>2</sup>

### What causes oral disease?

There are about 500 tiny different types of bacteria sitting in your mouth. You can never get rid of them all, and some we need. When these bacteria meet sugars in your mouth, oral disease can begin. Keeping these bacteria in check is important and requires brushing regularly to remove built up bacteria and plaque because the buildup of these bacteria may cause tooth decay resulting in infection and other diseases.

### What do you mean, "it can make my whole body sick"? How does that happen?

A simple cavity is caused when bacteria in the mouth break down sugars and produce an acid that destroys the protective coating on your teeth. This is the first step to more serious oral diseases. When bacteria get out of control in your mouth, as a result of poor oral care, gums can become infected. Infected gums become a port of entry into the bloodstream for bacteria that may cause infections in other areas of the body.<sup>1</sup> Studies have shown a connection exists between oral diseases and cardiovascular diseases, stroke, diabetes, and cancer treatment.

### Can oral disease be treated? Will treating my oral disease help my other health problems?

Yes, oral disease can be treated. Improving oral health improves overall health. Some studies have found, for example, that in diabetics treating oral disease improved blood sugar control.<sup>4</sup> On the flip side, health conditions such as diabetes elevate the risk of oral disease. Diabetics tend to have dryer mouths, which allows for the buildup of more plaque, thus elevating their risk of developing oral disease. Also, once the condition has started, increased blood sugar levels of diabetics makes healing time for oral disease longer.<sup>3</sup>

### When am I most susceptible to getting an oral disease?

Dental health is important at all ages because oral disease can occur at any age. During pregnancy, gum infection can cause complications such as miscarriages, premature birth, and reduced growth and development.<sup>2</sup> At a young age, as soon as teeth erupt, cavities, the most common chronic disease among young children, may develop. During adolescence, changes in the balance of hormones in the body as well as a changing diet affect oral health. In the elderly, respiratory problems may develop as a result of poor oral care. For many older adults, proper oral care will help reduce the risk of developing pneumonia, for example.<sup>2</sup>

### How can oral disease be prevented?

In addition to daily brushing and flossing, saliva is also key for fighting oral disease. The enzymes it contains help destroy infectious bacteria. Simple things such as chewing sugarless gum and increasing water intake increase saliva production. Reducing sugar consumption, avoiding sharing utensils, and having regular dental visits are other easy ways of preventing oral disease. Given the potential connections between healthy mouths and healthy bodies, it is well worth the effort to take care of your mouth as an important step in maintaining overall health.

Sources: <sup>1</sup> "Oral health: A window to your overall health." MayoClinic.com. 2007. <sup>2</sup> "Oral and Whole Body Health." Scientific American (p. 23,26,39). 2006. <sup>3</sup> Academy of General Dentistry. "Diabetes: A Link Between Oral And Overall Health?." ScienceDaily.com. 2004. <sup>4</sup> "Oral-Systemic Health." American Dental Association. 2008. Smiles For All, a project of the Quad City Health Initiative (QCHI), seeks to increase access to dental care prevention and treatment services for the underserved members of our community. The QCHI is a community partnership in active pursuit of a healthier community. The Initiative seeks to be a catalyst for improving the health and overall quality of life within the Quad Cities, raise awareness of health issues, encourages or creates projects to address gaps in health services and fosters community collaboration in all aspects of health. Major financial sponsors of the Initiative are Trinity Regional Health System and Genesis Health System. Additional financial support is provided in 2008 by Alcoa and First Midwest Bank. For more information or to join our efforts, call 563-421-2815 or visit our website at: