

Article Level: Advanced

Your Mouth and Your Health

**Linda F. Jarrett, Medical Writer**

## Introduction

When you make that regular trip to the dentist, remember that no matter how much you floss and brush, your mouth talks about you, and not just about your dental habits. It's also giving the dentist information on your general health.

Dr. Timothy Donley, of Bowling Green, Kentucky, says, "Without question, the mouth is a window to the rest of the body. Health changes often show up in the mouth earlier than they do elsewhere."

**"Health changes often show up in the mouth earlier than they do elsewhere," says Donley.**

The reason for this, Donley says, is that the mouth is lined with a "specialized skin--the mucosa," and any disease affecting the body can also affect the skin in the mouth. "If you notice changes in the mouth, you can oftentimes treat these problems before more serious damage occurs elsewhere in the body."

Cold sores, canker sores, fever blisters, and other mouth lesions are not an uncommon occurrence. But, if these don't clear up with treatment, that is one indication that something is amiss.

Donley says, "I have had patients come in with changes in their oral mucosa that you would not normally see in response to bacterial-induced gingivitis."

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One potentially serious condition, according to Donley, is called BMMP--benign mucous membrane pemphigoid. "These are mouth lesions that attack the mucous membranes. The fact that it does this in the mouth means it can attack other mucous membranes, and one of the primary targets is the mucous membranes of the eyes--and this can lead to blindness."

Another disease commonly seen by dental professionals is diabetes. Donley says, "Oftentimes diabetes is first picked up in the mouth and that's the most common thing dentists will find. If the patient has gum abscesses that don't respond to traditional treatment, that's because diabetes reduces the ability of the patient to respond to bacterial infection."

Dentists also spot blood disorders: The most common is leukemia. Donley says, "Some patients come in with spontaneous gum bleeding. Usually when gums are inflamed, they do bleed, but they have to be provoked by brushing or flossing. They rarely start bleeding on their own, but this does happen with leukemia."

Dr. Dan Stoekel, an oral pathologist at Southern Illinois University School of Dentistry in Edwardsville, Illinois, says an extremely red tongue or "crusty red areas" in the corner of the mouth could indicate anemia. "Also anything that appears to be a yeast infection can be due to anemia. We treat them as a yeast infection and if that doesn't cure the problem, we consider anemia and do a blood test."

The dentist oftentimes picks up metabolic disorders such as Crohn's disease and Addison's disease, Stoekel says. Addison's disease, an endocrine or hormonal disorder, causes areas of hyperpigmentation in the mouth.

Stoekel explained, "Patients will have areas that, many times, look like racial pigmentation, so in persons who are

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African American or who have darker-colored skin, you have to be sure you don't mistake these areas for normal pigmentation."

Crohn's disease, a gastrointestinal tract disease, distinguishes itself by long ulcerations on the inside of the cheek. "Hyperparathyroidism in the oral cavity is usually picked up on X-rays because the bone looks different than it normally does. It has a ground-glass appearance and you can see radiolucencies which would be evidence of this condition."

Patients with bulimia don't escape the dentist's eye. According to Stoekel, repeated vomiting of stomach acid destroys the enamel surfaces on the back teeth.

Dentists also find Kaposi's sarcoma, a vascular tumor, on the inside of the mouth, which indicates the HIV virus. Stoekel says, "Sometimes patients will have hairy leukoplakia, a kind of linear area covering most of the side of the tongue that's a result of the Epstein-Barr virus. But it would be unusual to see this in an oral cavity with a normal immune system. These are the effects of a weakened immune system--possibly from HIV virus."

Donley says herpes-type infections many times begin in the mouth, as do mucocutaneous disorders such as lupus.

He adds, "Many patients will have gingival changes due to allergic reactions. You can pick up on that--send a patient to the allergist and discover he or she is allergic to the coating on the silverware they just bought."

Mike Suden, a dentist in Chesterfield, Missouri, who specializes in oral-maxillary surgery, says vitamin deficiencies show up in the mouth, especially on the tongue, which is usually bright red. "They will come in the office with tingling and burning on the tongue because the nerve endings on the tongue are damaged, and this also causes them not to taste food."

He added, "It's normal for people to think strange lesions in their mouths could be oral cancer, but many times dentists will find malignant lesions resulting from a cancer elsewhere in the body. Sometimes the patient will have what we call a silent primary, which is a scary thing."

He says, "Many times what we see are swelling, redness, or altered sensation. Sometimes the teeth will loosen. Anyone with an ulceration that hasn't cleared up in 10 days needs to come in."

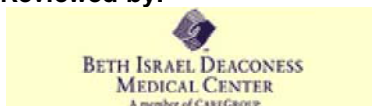
Suden says people should pay attention to the inside of their mouths besides just brushing their teeth. "On a normal physical examination, most physicians will ask you to open your mouth and stick out your tongue. Then they'll look at your throat and maybe not catch the other areas of the mouth."

So how can you listen to your mouth more intently? Suden suggests:

- Ask your dentist to do a cancer exam when you go for your regular cleaning, ideally every 6 months. This involves looking at and under the tongue, along the cheeks, and at areas you might not see in your mirror.
- Examine your own mouth carefully each month. If you see anything unusual, see your dentist. Suden says many patients will come in complaining of a bony bump or area that turns out to be normal. "It's important to know your own mouth."
- Brush your tongue with a soft brush once a day. Not only does this clean, but it helps with taste sensation.

Linda F. Jarrett is a freelance medical writer.

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