

What is the Link Between Diabetes and Periodontal Disease?

Diabetic Control. Like other complications of diabetes, gum disease is linked to diabetic control. People with poor blood sugar control get gum disease more often and more severely, and they lose more teeth than do persons with good control. In fact, people whose diabetes is well controlled have no more periodontal disease than persons without diabetes. Children with IDDM (insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus) are also at risk for gum problems. Good diabetic control is the best protection against periodontal disease.

Studies show that controlling blood sugar levels lowers the risk of some complications of diabetes, such as eye and heart disease and nerve damage. Scientists believe many complications, including gum disease, can be prevented with good diabetic control.

Blood Vessel Changes. Thickening of blood vessels is a complication of diabetes that may increase risk for gum disease. Blood vessels deliver oxygen and nourishment to body tissues, including the mouth, and carry away the tissues' waste products. Diabetes causes blood vessels to thicken, which slows the flow of nutrients and the removal of harmful wastes. This can weaken the resistance of gum and bone tissue to infection.

Bacteria. Many kinds of bacteria (germs) thrive on sugars, including glucose -- the sugar linked to diabetes. When diabetes is poorly controlled, high glucose levels in mouth fluids may help germs grow and set the stage for gum disease.

Smoking. The harmful effects of smoking, particularly heart disease and cancer, are well known. Studies show that smoking also increases the chances of developing gum disease. In fact, smokers are five times more likely than nonsmokers to have gum disease. For smokers with diabetes, the risk is even greater. If you are a smoker with diabetes, age 45 or older, you are 20 times more likely than a person without these risk factors to get severe gum disease.

Periodontal diseases are infections of the gum and bone that hold the teeth in place. In advanced stages, they lead to painful chewing problems and even tooth loss. Like any infection, gum disease can make it hard to keep your blood sugar under control.