

How are mental health and oral health connected?



Oral health may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think about how poor mental health can affect someone. But there are several ways in which mental health and oral health conditions can be connected.

The close connection between mental and physical health has become much more widely known in recent years.

It's now well-established that poor physical health can increase your risk of mental health problems. And similarly, we know that poor mental health can adversely affect your physical health and wellbeing.

Mental health and your diet

If you're struggling with your mental health, you may find it harder to keep eating a healthy diet. You may be more likely to choose high-sugar or processed foods, and fizzy, high-sugar drinks. This can cause tooth decay, erosion and gum disease.



Mental health and looking after your teeth and gums

When someone has a mental health condition, it may affect how able they feel to look after themselves, including taking care of their teeth and gums. That can lead to a higher likelihood of dental disease.

Stress, anxiety, dementia, night terrors, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are all also known to be linked to higher risk of tooth grinding (bruxism). This can lead to a number of further dental and physical health problems.



Mental health and seeking dental advice

Unfortunately, people going through times of poor mental health have a tendency not to seek help with routine dental care. This may be for reasons of anxiety, phobia, economic difficulties, embarrassment, or a reluctance to address problems that may not be immediately painful or otherwise obvious. During the pandemic, advice to stay home or shield may also have caused a greater reluctance to seek dental care and advice.

Dry mouth

Dry mouth (xerostomia) can sometimes be caused by anxiety. It can also be a side effects of antidepressant medications and can have a profound effect on oral health. It can potentially cause a rapid increase in tooth decay and erosion, among other serious problems.

Over-brushing

Good brushing and other oral hygiene measures are vital to oral health. But obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and bipolar disorder can lead to over-vigorous, repetitive scrubbing of teeth and gums, leading to abrasive damage.

Smoking, alcohol and drug use

Smoking, drinking too much alcohol and using illegal drugs can be linked to common mental health issues such as stress and anxiety, mood disorders, depression and schizophrenia. It's well known that smoking can cause gum disease and oral cancer. But drinking too much alcohol, especially when combined with smoking, further increases the risk. Illegal drug use can also lead to tooth grinding.



Eating disorders

If someone has an eating disorder that causes them to have a more acidic or high-sugar diet, it can cause damage to teeth and gums. Bulimia and self-induced vomiting can cause rapid and serious acid dental erosion. This may have a visible effect on the teeth, although it tends to mainly affect inner, less-visible surfaces. Acid erosion can also be made severely worse by tooth grinding and the reduction in saliva flow associated with it. This is due to the acid-neutralising effects of saliva.



The importance of seeking support

The presentation, symptoms and causes of the dental problems mentioned here can be highly variable. Sometimes they can be sources of great concern, but often they may go unnoticed. The good news is that routine dental checks, as well as appointments for acute symptoms, are very effective in treating and preventing these problems. It may even be a simple matter of advice and making small changes to your diet and oral hygiene.

As with most medical concerns, regular dental checks and early advice or treatment will generally lead to a simpler, more successful outcome. The same is absolutely true of mental health conditions – so please don't hesitate to seek support from a medical professional if you are struggling.

Sources:

"Mental Health and Oral Health: What You Need to Know" Natalie Asmussen, dentaly.org, 2023

Dr Antonis Kousoulis. "70 years on... no health without mental health" mentalhealth.org.uk, published April 2019.

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