



**EVERYBODY BENEFITS:** EMPLOYEE GUIDE

# Could a dentist help save your life?



A close-up photograph of two young women smiling. The woman on the left has short, teal-colored hair and is wearing a dark denim jacket. The woman on the right has dark, curly hair and is wearing a green zip-up hoodie. They are both looking towards the camera with joyful expressions.

# Smile.

## The answer is yes!

Good oral health is down to more than having a dazzling white smile and fresh breath. It's more than brushing and flossing twice a day to avoid plaque, tooth decay and gum disease.

Your pearly whites and mouth can alert dental professionals to more serious physical illnesses and mental wellbeing concerns.

In this guide, we open up about what your mouth is really telling you about your general health and how to look after your mouth, teeth and gums.

Almost  
**1 in 3**

(31%) UK adults have  
tooth decay

# Dental distress

## NHS dentistry is in crisis.

Although any UK citizen who is pregnant, on low-income benefits or under 18 is entitled to free NHS dental services, there is such a dental draught across the UK, you may still struggle to get an appointment.

A staggering 97% of new patients are unable to access NHS dentistry, which leaves them with the option of paying private fees of up to £500 for a tooth extraction or filling.

Meanwhile, oral cancer, which is usually picked up during routine check-ups, has risen by a staggering 46% in the past decade.

**66%**  
of adults have  
visible plaque

## Don't DIY your dentures!

The dental crisis has also led to a worrying rise in "DIY dentistry" where people riddled with pain go to the extreme lengths of extracting their own teeth with pliers, or using superglue to stick homemade resin teeth to their gums!

A poll of 500 UK dentists revealed that 82% have treated patients who have taken matters into their own hands with DIY dentistry.

**28%**

of UK employees have  
taken time off work  
due to dental pain -  
equivalent to 23  
million sick days



# From decay to A&E

Tooth decay is the biggest cause of NHS hospital admissions for children in England aged 5-9, with 21,162 admitted in 2024/25.

Between April 2022 and May 2023, 70,000 adults were also admitted to A&E with tooth decay. This figure is surely set to deteriorate further along with our oral health, as 40% of children no longer have access to regular dental appointments.

The future of oral health looks far from bright.

That's why it's more important than ever to take care of your pearly whites. Prevention is always better than cure.

## Dentists taking on the role of GP

Your oral health speaks volumes about your general health and wellbeing. When your dentist is doing a filling or a clean and polish, they are likely giving you more than a routine check-up. They are also checking for signs of more serious underlying health issues.

In a survey by BUPA, only 53% of respondents knew about the link between dental health and mouth cancer. Even fewer participants were aware of the connection with other conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.



**25%**

do not brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste



7 serious health conditions  
that can be spotted by

# ‘opening wide’

1

## Heart disease

If you have a family history of cardiovascular disease you should inform your dentist, as many people with heart disease also suffer with gum disease. Bacteria can enter your bloodstream and make their way through to your heart.

2

## Diabetes

People with diabetes are often vulnerable to gum disease. Although your dentist cannot formally diagnose type 2 diabetes, if your other diabetes symptoms are accompanied by excessive thirst and lethargy, they may advise that you see your GP for further tests.

3

## Mouth cancer

During your routine check-up, your dentist can also check the inside of your mouth for suspicious patches or unusual lumps which may be a sign of cancerous cells.



**Two-thirds**  
of young people know  
more about mental health  
than dental health

## 4 Eating disorders

Dentists can detect signs of an eating disorder by the loss of tooth enamel on the insides of front teeth, sensitive teeth, bleeding gums and dry mouth.

## 5 Osteoporosis

Loose teeth and receding gums can be an early sign of osteoporosis.

## 6 Dementia

One of the early signs of dementia is poor oral hygiene, as patients can forget whether they've brushed their teeth. Bacteria that cause some forms of gum disease may be able to travel to the brain causing cognitive impairments in elderly patients.

## 7 Kidney disease

Foul or sweet-smelling breath, often accompanied by dry mouth, can be a sign of kidney disease. If you notice any of these symptoms, it's important to speak with your GP about a possible diagnosis.

# The bad side of bad oral health

Gum disease is caused by untreated plaque build-up on your teeth and gums over time.

The most common signs of gum disease are:

- Bleeding gums
- Receding gums
- Swollen gums
- Bad breath
- Loose teeth

## The two types are:

**Gingivitis:** the most common and treatable form of gum disease that causes irritation, redness and swelling around the base of your teeth. Adopting a healthy oral hygiene routine and having teeth professionally cleaned regularly can help reverse gingivitis.

**Periodontitis:** the more serious, life-long, irreversible gum infection that destroys the bone that supports your teeth causing tooth decay and tooth loss.

## 0-4

### What did your gums score?

During an oral check-up, you will hear your dentist call out numbers - this is your gum score.

Dentists score your gum health from 0 to 4. "Zero" means your gums are perfect but if you score a 4, this can indicate that you have gum disease.

## 21,162

children in England were admitted to hospital with tooth decay

(2024/25)





# 8 steps to good oral health

Simple good habits can make a big difference to your oral health.

**1**

**Do it twice daily. At least!**

Brush for 2 minutes twice a day including last thing at night with a fluoride toothpaste to remove plaque which is the main cause of tooth decay and gum disease.

**2**

**Electric or manual,  
hard or soft?**

Ask your dentist to recommend which type of brush is right for you.

**3**

**Floss first**

Use an interdental brush, dental floss, water or air flossers before brushing to remove plaque and food build-up.

**4**

**Spit! Don't rinse the good stuff away!**

After brushing your teeth, always spit - never rinse your mouth out as it washes away the fluoride which strengthens the tooth enamel making it more resistant to tooth decay.

## 5 Feed your fangs

Use a fluoride mouthwash as well as brushing twice daily – but not as a replacement. It will help to clear food and stop plaque from building up and kill the bacteria associated with bad breath.

## 6 Your teeth are what you eat

What and how we eat can have a big impact on oral health. Drinking and eating starchy or sugary food creates acid which attacks teeth enamel for over twenty minutes after eating.

Avoid snacking on sugary, processed or acidic foods and sweet fizzy drinks.

Eating three meals a day instead of snacking is far better for oral health – and drink plenty of water to wash away the bad bits.

## 7 Quit smoking

Smoking is known to be one of the main causes of mouth cancer, but some studies are linking vaping with increased risk of gum disease – so avoid both to improve overall health.

## 8 Check-ups

Your dentist will suggest your check-up schedule based on how good your oral health is. It can vary from 3 months to 2 years, depending on the health of your teeth and gums plus your risk of future problems.



A man with a beard and glasses is eating a salad from a glass bowl. He is wearing a denim jacket and a white turtleneck. He has a tattoo on his left arm. He is sitting at a table with an open notebook and a pencil.

# Say cheese!

## Foods to smile about

To keep gum disease and cavities at bay, try to incorporate these teeth-friendly, low-sugar, high calcium, fibre-rich foods into your diet:

- Cheese
- Natural yoghurt
- Leafy greens
- Apples
- Raw carrots
- Celery
- Almonds

# 10 foods to frown about

Some sugars occur naturally in seemingly healthy foods such as fruit, honey and milk. Many processed foods have teeth-damaging sugars and sweeteners added, but both natural and artificial can cause tooth decay so try to cut down on these foods:

- 1 Citrus fruits and juices
- 2 Dried fruits
- 3 Cakes and biscuits
- 4 Sweets and chocolate
- 5 Flavoured milk and yoghurt
- 6 Breakfast cereals and bars
- 7 Jams and fruit in syrup
- 8 Pasta sauces, marinades and ketchup
- 9 Soft and sports drinks
- 10 Wine and sweet alcoholic drinks





## Dental benefits

Speak to your employer about dental schemes that may be available to give you something to smile about.

**Dental insurance plans:** Covering check-ups, hygiene appointments and necessary treatments to provide essential support. These can be purchased by yourself privately (speak with your dentist) or via your employer.

**Health cash plans:** Helping employees manage routine dental care costs.

**Private Medical Insurance (PMI):** Some plans include oral health cover to support preventive and restorative treatments, others will cover major oral surgical procedures. These can be embedded or optional add-on benefits.

**Flexible benefits schemes:** Allowing you to opt into dental plans as part of your overall package.

**Group protection policies:** Some providers include virtual dental services as part of their Group Risk cover, making professional advice more accessible. Digital dentistry providers like Toothfairy, for example, use cutting edge technology to diagnose, treat and monitor patient treatments via an app.

**Specialist dental services:** Some dental providers allow self-pay access to dental care and offer useful online resources on symptoms and treatments.



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