

Periodontal disease and your patient

Patients will generally be unaware they have gingivitis – so your relationship with them and your recommendations for oral care becomes even more important. Understanding how someone perceives periodontal disease can help inform the best ways to approach communication with them about management.

In a survey of perceptions of periodontal disease conducted in 1,200 patients in France in 2018, it was found that the most commonly noticed symptom is bleeding gums.⁷

Halitosis is also common in periodontal disease, but often people seem unaware of this issue. Halitosis can have a range of negative social and psychological effects, and so it should be communicated sensitively.⁸ This should be accompanied by reassurance that there are actions your patient can take to tackle their periodontal disease and thereby reduce the chance of halitosis.⁸

Indeed, it is the bacteria associated with periodontal disease that can also lead to bad breath. Therefore, a specialised product with antibacterial efficacy can be recommended to help improve halitosis.

Sore, inflamed and red gums were also reported, with red and sore gums causing the most embarrassment in the survey.⁷ These results suggest a need to educate patients on the signs of gingivitis and how to act when they recognize these.



79%

Proportion of patients reporting that they experienced occasional bleeding⁷

Periodontal disease impacts quality of life

Given that oral disease has been shown to reduce quality of life (QoL),⁹ it is important to explore the possibility of such wider effects on your patients.

It is possible that oral health significantly affects the QoL of all your patients. There may be several signs that this is happening, which your patient may report or you may observe during an appointment, including⁹:

- Functional limitation (e.g., difficulty chewing)
- Psychological discomfort (e.g., anxiety or depression)
- Social disability (i.e., difficulty in social relationships)
- Difficulty in pronouncing words
- Reduced ability to taste and eat food
- Feeling insecure, tense, embarrassed and irritated
- Difficulty in relaxing and performing everyday activities

Whether you observe any of these signs or not, it is worth exploring with people using open-ended questions (i.e., those that require more than a yes or no answer) whether they are experiencing any difficulties in their day-to-day life related to their oral health.

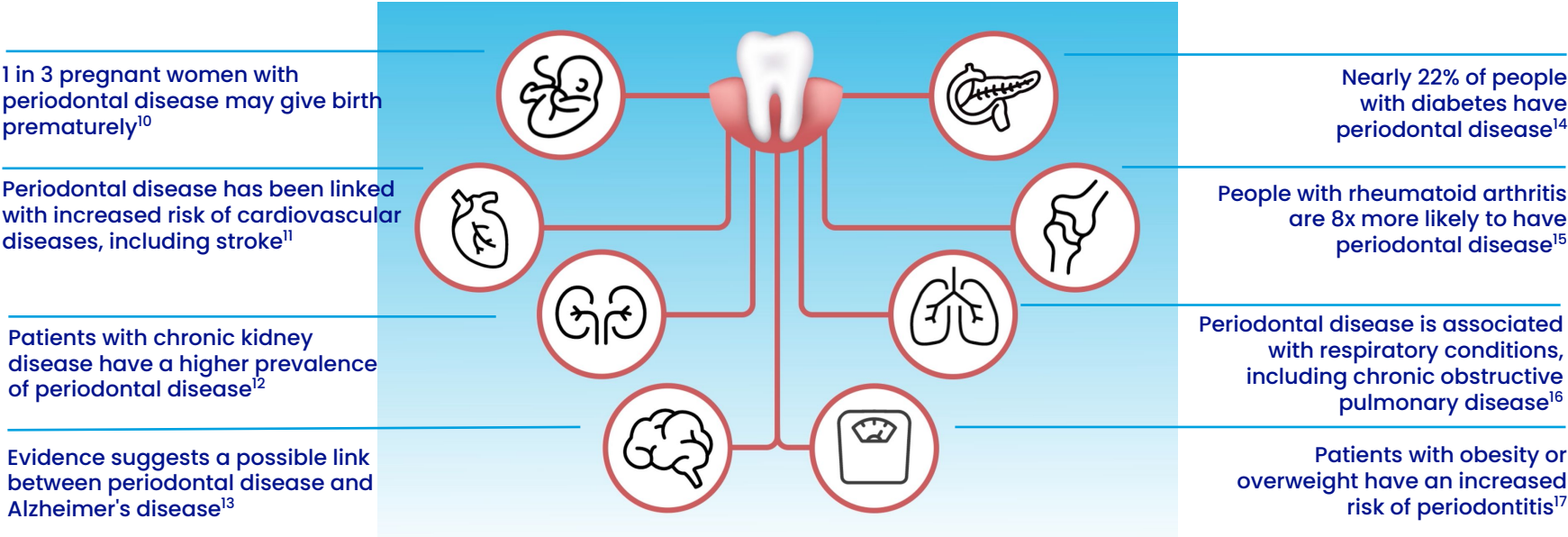
Identifying these effects of oral health on life may help inform oral hygiene plans or identify a need for onward referral to other healthcare professionals.



A Swedish study used the Oral Health Impact Profile (OHIP) as a measure of patients' perception of their quality of life. Those who had lost the most bone length in over 30% of teeth experienced the biggest effect on QoL.⁹

Periodontal disease impacts overall health

You will be aware of the strong link that has been demonstrated between oral health and systemic health. But patients may not be.



Periodontal disease impacts overall health

It may help patients to see the importance of prevention if you inform those with major chronic inflammatory diseases of ageing, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, chronic kidney disease, obesity, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, of the strong association with periodontitis.¹⁶

Links between periodontal disease and both heart disease and Alzheimer's disease have also been reported, although more research is needed to fully understand these relationships.

Until further evidence is found, simply helping people you treat to understand there are negative consequences of periodontal disease beyond oral health may motivate them to create new oral hygiene habits.

For those with other chronic health conditions, oral health may affect their management of these other diseases. For example, severe periodontitis adversely affects blood sugar control in people living with diabetes.¹⁶

Pregnant women may also experience problems – a third of pregnant women with periodontitis disease may give birth prematurely and there is also an increased risk of low birth weight.¹⁰

People may be more self-motivated to care for their oral health if they know that it could help them manage another major health problem or keep them healthy while pregnant.



People living with diabetes have a 3x higher risk of developing gum problems¹⁸ and nearly 22% of people living with diabetes have periodontal disease¹⁴

Dental professionals are critical in supporting health

As you can see, as a dental professional you play a critical role in supporting people's health beyond maintaining good oral health. The majority of people only recognize periodontal disease after experiencing occasional bleeding, which may already be too late to reverse it.

Regular dental appointments are fundamental to periodontal gum health to enable professional removal of plaque, identify risk factors, and spot early signs of gum inflammation.

A good oral hygiene routine will heavily influence both the potential onset of the disease, as well as its prognosis. According to the EFP guidelines, surgical treatment should only be performed if good oral hygiene has been achieved beforehand, so empowering your patients to achieve this is critical.¹⁹

As a dental practitioner, you can play a pivotal role in supporting patients to create good habits and improve not only their oral health but their overall health too.

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