

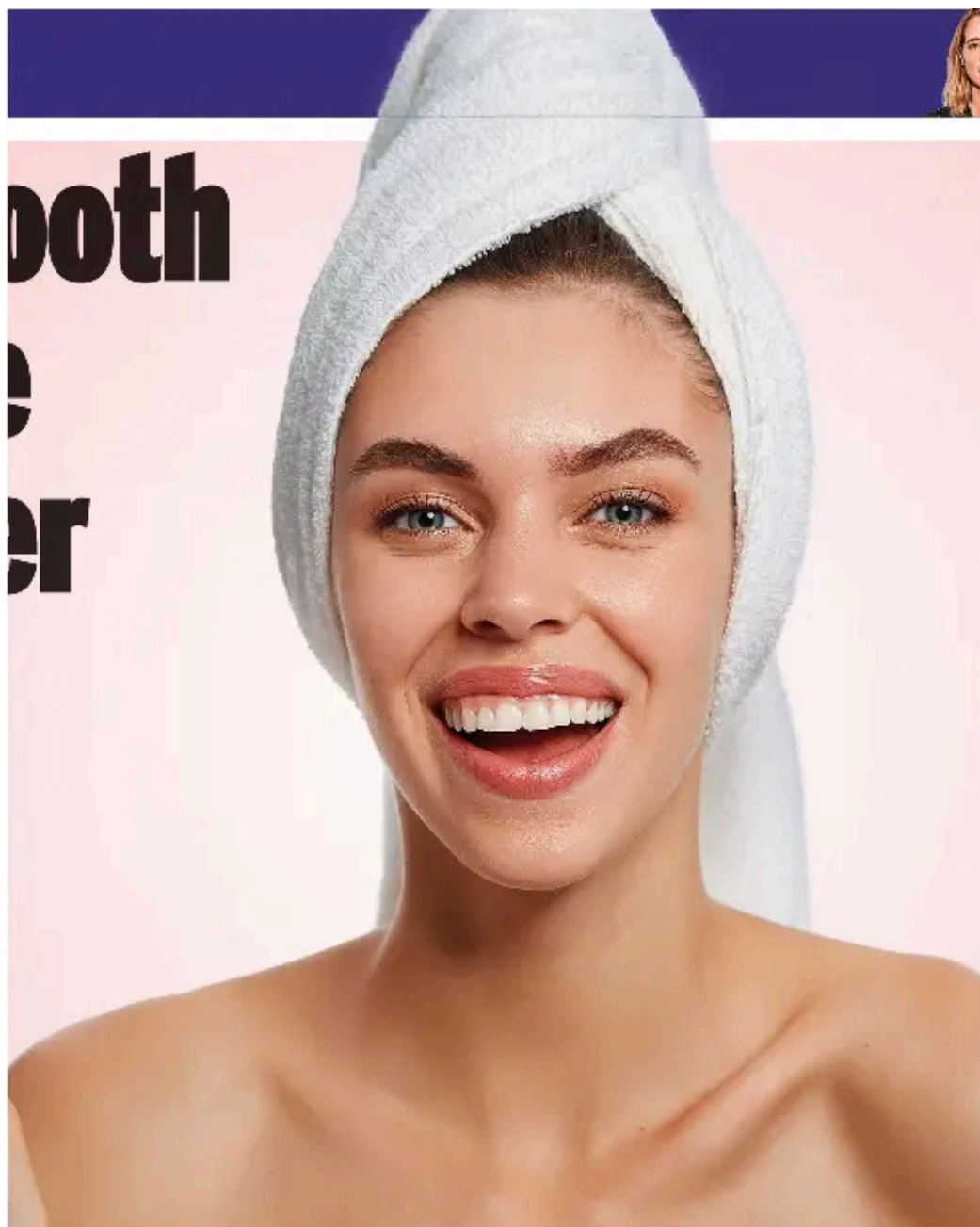
- Dental care / Hygiene

The tooth of the matter

Jo Dunbar examines how your dental health can affect your whole body

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Periodontitis is associated with increase in the rate of cognitive decline



Good dental hygiene isn't just about a glowing smile. Developing positive oral health habits benefits your entire body – while being lax over tooth care or ignoring annoying minor symptoms could lead to inflammation and severe health issues.

It's thought half the adult population has gum disease – the first sign is often bleeding gums, known as gingivitis.

If left untreated, gingivitis can develop into periodontitis which affects the tissues that hold teeth in place. Teeth can loosen, feel more sensitive or even fall out and breath can become sour.

Dr Catherine Tannahill, a dentist at Portman Dentex (portmandentex.com), explains there is so much more to oral health than pearly whites: “Our teeth act as a gateway to the body, so ensuring you have good oral hygiene means you avoid more serious health conditions.”

Heart health: Experts have made the link between not enough tooth brushing and heart disease.

Nyree Whitley, Chief Clinical Officer at mydentist (mydentist.co.uk), says: “Research has shown people who have poor oral health or suffer from conditions such as gum disease or tooth loss are at increased risk of developing cardiovascular issues.”

Bacteria that aren't effectively cleaned from your teeth, gums and tongue can make its way around your body in the bloodstream. A study by Aberdeen Royal Infirmary in 2023 found that two-thirds of 160 people admitted with a heart attack had a severe gum infection.

Nyree says: “In rare cases, inflammation from bacteria within your mouth can also lead to infection within the lining of your heart, which, over time, could cause clogged arteries.”

Failing to keep your mouth healthy has repercussions elsewhere, too. “The first sign of gum disease is bleeding gums and studies have shown those with gum disease may be more likely to have a stroke,” says Nyree. “They could also find themselves more at risk of developing lung disease, due to having a higher level of bacteria within their mouths, which can cause chest infections.

“I'd recommend brushing your teeth twice a day and flossing regularly.”

Dementia: Academics have been working to establish a link between dental problems and dementia for some time. Professor Nicola West, who led the MySmile study at The Bristol Dental School, explains, “Recent studies suggest a clear association between dementia and poor oral health.

“A study has shown oral bacteria were four times more likely to be found in an Alzheimer's brain than a brain without the disease. Other studies have shown that periodontitis is associated with a sixfold increase in the rate of cognitive decline.” Prof West has some positive news, however: “Evidence indicates that if gum disease can be stabilised, it might be possible to slow dementia disease progression.

“Because bleeding gums is a predictor of developing periodontitis, early detection and management is thought to prevent many cases of periodontitis before the effects become irreversible.”

Being vigilant about your gum health, – and that of any of your older relatives, is important.

As Prof West says: “The key message is brush your teeth twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste and see an oral healthcare professional regularly.”

Erectile dysfunction: Your sex life and tooth brushing might seem unrelated (beyond preventing your breath being off putting), but a study at Jinan University in China found that poor oral health can more than double a man's risk of erectile dysfunction.

Dr Victoria Sampson, a functional dentist at The Health Society in Mayfair (thehealthsociety.co.uk), says: "The link between erectile dysfunction and periodontal disease is real and strong.

Poor oral health, particularly gum disease, can cause the release of low-grade chronic inflammation from the mouth to the rest of the body.

"This inflammation can damage blood vessels, restricting blood flow to parts of the body, including the penis."

Fertility and birth weight: Last year researchers in China found that maternal periodontitis was linked to babies with a lower birth weight. Pregnant women and women who have had a baby or a stillbirth in the last 12 months are entitled to free dental care as pregnancy hormones can exacerbate inflammation of the gums, leading to possible infections or gum disease.

The NHS advises pregnant women to apply for a maternity exemption certificate, known as a MatEx, to secure free dental appointments.

You will be able to get one from your midwife or doctor.

Academics have also begun examining a link between gum disease issues and infertility. The findings aren't yet well-defined, but it's thought that the chances of pregnancy will be lower for women with gum disease.

Experts in Sweden believe the condition can cause women to take two months longer to conceive.

Diabetes: Good dental health is key for minimising your diabetes risk. Dr Sampson explains: "The connection operates in both directions, with diabetes increasing the risk of oral health issues and poor dental hygiene exacerbating diabetes.

"Research has shown that if you have gum disease, you are 53% more likely to develop diabetes, and if you have diabetes, you are 34% more likely to develop gum disease.

"It is important to note that controlled diabetes is not a risk factor for gum disease.

However, if it is not well controlled, patients can develop a more severe form of gum disease that is harder to treat.

"Severe gum disease can impact blood glucose control, and there is a direct link between how severe your gum disease is and your risk of diabetes complications."