- Stress / Dental care

How stress affects your oral health



We know stress impacts mental wellbeing, but did you know research by the National Institutes of Health also suggests stress can affect your oral health?

Here's how stress can affect your mouth.

TEETH GRINDING AND JAW CLENCHING (BRUXISM)

One of the most common ways stress manifests in the mouth is through teeth grinding, also known as bruxism. Over time, grinding wears down tooth enamel, leading to sensitivity, increased risk of cavities and even cracked or chipped teeth.

While bruxism can occur during the day, it tends to be more common at night while you're asleep.

If you wake up with a sore jaw, stiffness in your neck, or nagging tension headaches, stress-related bruxism might be the underlying cause.

GUM DISEASE (PERIODONTITIS)

Stress can compromise your immune system. A weak immune system makes it harder for your body to fight off infections, including those in your mouth. This can increase your risk of gum disease, also known as periodontitis. Gingivitis starts as periodontitis and can progress to gum and bone loss around the teeth if not treated.

DRY MOUTH (XEROSTOMIA)

Saliva keeps your mouth healthy by washing away food and neutralising acids. When stressed, your body might not make enough saliva, leading to dry mouth (xerostomia). Without enough saliva, your mouth can't defend itself properly, making it easier for bacteria to grow, leading to tooth decay, gum disease and bad breath. Plaque and tartar can build up quicker when your mouth is dry, causing more problems.

CANKER SORES (APHTHOUS ULCERS)

Although the exact cause of canker sores isn't fully understood, stress is a known trigger for mouth ulcers. Although they're generally harmless, the discomfort caused by canker sores may discourage brushing and flossing, increasing the risk of dental problems.

NEGLECTING ORAL HYGIENE

When stress becomes overwhelming, it's easy to let daily routines slip. People with high-stress levels may neglect to brush, floss and make regular dental appointments. Over time, this neglect can lead to plaque build-up, cavities and gum disease.

HEALTHY WAYS OF COPING WITH STRESS

The good news is that there are steps you can take to minimise the effects of stress on your dental health.

- **Take a moment to calm your mind:** When stress hits, try some meditation, yoga, deep breathing, or even jotting down your thoughts in a journal.
- **Remember to brush and floss:** No matter how overwhelmed you feel, keep up your daily oral hygiene routine.
- **Keep up your dental check-ups:** Your dentist can spot early signs of stress-related damage, like teeth grinding or gum inflammation, and recommend treatment before problems worsen.
- **Consider a mouth guard:** If you grind your teeth, a custom mouth guard can protect them and ease any jaw pain you might be experiencing.
- **Stay hydrated:** Drink lots of fluids throughout the day to combat dry mouth. Avoid sweetened beverages and stick to water if possible.
- **Speak to your dentist:** If you suffer from canker sores, speak to your dentist or doctor. They may recommend topical gels or mouth rinses to soothe them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Stress is a part of life, but knowing how it affects your dental health means you can take action. By managing stress and ensuring good oral hygiene, you can keep your mouth, teeth and gums healthy, even when dealing with heightened stress. — Affinity Health.