

a healthy conversation

What your dental hygienist knows just by looking into your mouth

Oral hygiene is more important to your health than you may think

From Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield

Hygienists are on the front line of oral hygiene, and may be the first person to discover symptoms of other health-related problems. If you're a regular at your dentist's office, you may spend more time with your hygienist than your dentist. However, your hygienist is looking for more than tartar, and can detect problems like heart disease or diabetes.

"Your gums, teeth and mouth have much to say about your health, overall. Sometimes, the first sign of disease can show up in the mouth," says Heather Williams, a hygienist at Prairie Dental in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Diseases like diabetes, certain types of oral cancer and even some vitamin deficiencies can be first identified in a dentist's office at a regular

examination. In addition to diseases, your hygienists may have insights into bad habits, like smoking, chewing tobacco, and foods and drinks you should be avoiding.

"The mouth is the gateway to good health," says Williams. "Lack of good oral care can have a negative impact on your overall health."

Here are a few other things your hygienist knows:

- **Bad breath:** Sometimes, bad breath can be solved with better oral hygiene. Sometimes, it's more serious than that. Breath that smells "fruity" could be an indicator of diabetic ketoacidosis while a fishy smell could indicate kidney problems.
- **Heart disease:** Gum disease can let bacteria enter your blood stream and lo-

cate elsewhere in the body. In other words, plaque in your mouth could also mean plaque in your arteries.

- **Oral cancer:** "We are looking for symptoms such as unexplained bleeding, chronic sores or speckled patches, thickenings, swelling, bumps or lumps," says Williams.

As you can see, your hygienist is more than the person who makes your teeth feel clean and smooth. "There is more than meets the eye," says Williams.

The American Dental Association recommends visiting your dentist every six months. If you need help finding a dentist, try the Find a Provider tool located on Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield's website at Wellmark.com.

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