



Let your mouth speak for itself

Did you know?

- Mouth cancer kills one person every five hours.
- It has seen an increase in the number of cases over the past four years with around 4,750 new cases every year.
- It has a mortality rate of 50%.
- Nearly 1,700 people in the UK die from mouth cancer every year, but the chances of surviving mouth cancer can increase from 50% to nearly 90% if it is detected and treated early.
- Mouth cancer awareness week (MCAW) takes place in November and is supported by Denplan.

Let your mouth speak for itself

Dentists can spot more than just dental decay and gum disease when they look into your mouth – they can also detect important clues about your general health. They are trained not only to look for early signs of serious diseases, such as mouth and throat cancers but dentists can also detect nutritional deficiencies, infections and adverse reactions to prescribed drugs. Dentists may even be able to pinpoint the cause of an aching neck. This gives you even more reasons to visit the dentist regularly.

Mouth Ulcers

If mouth ulcers last longer than three weeks or are larger than about half an inch in diameter, then you should see your dentist. Ulcers can be an early indicator of bowel diseases such as Chron's disease, inflammatory skin disorders, arthritic disorders, cancer or celiac disorders. Alton-based dentist Steve Charlton commented: "I once had a patient who came to my practice with a sharp tooth that had dug into his lip so badly that a painful ulcer had formed". One look at the ulcerated lip and Steve suspected that there was more to this than a sharp tooth and referred the patient to a specialist straight away. Unfortunately the patient was diagnosed with oral cancer, but was treated quickly. The message reinforces the importance of regular dental check-ups and the benefits that they can have on both your dental care and your well-being.

Tooth grinding

Before you visit an osteopath to help cure that neck pain or to help eliminate your clicking jaw, it may be worth visiting your dentist first. According to the British Dental Health Foundation, clicking, grinding and pain in your jaw joints or ringing and buzzing in your ears can be as a result of tooth grinding. Tooth grinding can lead to pain in your neck and back as a result of joint and muscle pains within your jaw area. It can physically wear teeth down, making them more sensitive and also make it more difficult for you to chew. Your dentist will be able to advise you whether or not tooth grinding has caused some of the symptoms in your neck or back, as well as possibly identifying potential reasons as to why you have been grinding your teeth. Subsequently, your dentist may recommend 'bite adjustments' or a 'bite guard' – a removable plastic appliance that fits over your teeth to help prevent you from clenching and grinding them during the night.

Mouth cancer

One of the most important things that dentists can spot is the first signs of mouth cancer. Mouth cancer is responsible for one death every five hours in the UK* and early diagnosis can dramatically improve the chances of recovery. Denplan dentists can conduct a soft-tissue examination to check for lesions that may be too small for you to have noticed yourself. If you drink or smoke, then you should be particularly vigilant because both increase the risk of mouth cancer. If it is detected early enough, it can respond well to treatment and the chances of a complete cure are extremely high. Dr Roger Matthews, chief dental officer, Denplan said: "If anyone is concerned about changes taking place in their mouth, I would strongly advise them to get checked out by their dentist, doctor or pharmacist. Spotting the early warning signs of this potentially fatal disease could save lives".

Dry mouth

A dry mouth is often a side effect of medication such as pain relief and anti-depressants. If your dentist notices that you are developing more cavities than usual, one of the first things they may ask you is whether or not you are taking any medication. This is because saliva helps to wash bacteria away in your mouth and if your saliva levels have reduced, it may increase the bacteria levels present. Medication can also impact other areas of your mouth. For example, if you notice that your tongue feels hairy and has a black appearance; it may be due to a change in the bacteria within your mouth – usually a result of taking anti-biotics.

More rarely, dry mouth and furry tongue could be related to other illnesses such as diabetes or anaemia. A furry tongue on its own could mean that you are not having enough fibre in your diet – your dentist may recommend using a tongue brush or tongue scraper to help overcome the immediate problem. It is however important to remember that if you have a dry mouth, although it could relate to some of the highlighted symptoms, it could simply be that you are dehydrated and need to drink more water. Water is essential for transporting calcium and other essential minerals for optimum dental health.

Bad breath

Bad breath can be a sign of gum disease resulting from poor oral hygiene. It can also be due to respiratory tract infections – sinus and lung infections. More rarely, bad breath could also be part of systemic illnesses such as diabetes, liver disease and kidney disease to name a few. Your dentist will be able to tell you whether your bad breath relates to gum disease and help to find solutions, ensuring that it is not a re-occurring problem.

That's not all...

There are a number of other areas that your dentist can pick up on, including Paget's disease – a metabolic bone disorder that usually affects older people. Asthmatics and diabetics are more likely to develop thrush in the mouth, due to the use of inhalers or low blood sugar levels, all of which can be identified by your dentist.

It is important that people recognise the importance of regular visits to the dentist. It's not always that you are at risk of dying from a toothache, but that problems with your teeth and gums can sometimes highlight other potentially life-threatening health problems. It is great that so many symptoms can be identified early and by your dentist. By simply attending your regular check-ups, you can have peace of mind that you have gained expert advice whilst maintaining good oral care.

* Cancer research UK 2006.