

Dentists are disease detectives

Early detection of serious medical conditions is being made in an unexpected place—the dental office. Because many other diseases can cause specific signs and symptoms in and around the mouth and jaw, dentists see clues that may point to critical health issues. As a result, increasing numbers of dentists are urging their patients to seek medical tests that seem unrelated to their dental checkups.

More than 120 disease signs and symptoms can now be detected through a routine oral exam.^{1,2} Regular dental checkups are more important than ever, not only for oral health but for general well being.

Dentists also perform thorough oral cancer examinations, including inspection of the oral cavity and neck. Since cancers of the mouth, tongue and jaw are usually first discovered during dental examinations, dentists are at the forefront for saving lives.

Oral clues that may indicate a serious health problem:

- **Anemia:** Burning, fiery red tongue, inflammation of the corners of mouth or pale gum tissues.
- **Diabetes:** Dry mouth, distinctive breath odor, burning tongue, high rate of tooth decay, inflammation and infections in the mouth.
- **Anorexia nervosa and bulimia:** Chemical erosion of tooth enamel, fillings that appear to be raised above the eroded tooth surfaces, sensitive teeth, enlargement of the parotid glands making the face look full and round, sweet breath aroma.
- **Kidney failure:** Retarded tooth development in children, dry mouth, odor, metallic taste and ulcers on the tongue and gums.
- **Deficient immune system (HIV positive):** Unexplained sore(s), red mouth due to opportunistic yeast infections (thrush mouth), non-removable white areas on the sides of the tongue.
- **Heart disease:** Pain radiating to the jaw caused by insufficient oxygen to the heart muscle.

1 J Am Dent Assoc, Vol 134, No suppl_1, 41S-48S. 2003 American Dental Association.

2 Dental Management of The Medically Compromised Patient, 7th Edition, 2008, Mosby Elsevier, St. Louis, MO.

3 Steven L. Bricker, Robert P. Langlais, and Craig S. Miller, Oral Diagnosis, Oral Medicine and Treatment Planning (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1994).

