

**“ORAL HEALTH AND OVERALL HEALTH - No Longer Two Separate Entities”
-Darnell Kaigler DDS, MS, PhD**

Each year, the **U.S. Surgeon General** issues a comprehensive report on various health topics important to our society. Over the years, these reports have raised awareness on a variety of public and social health issues such as obesity, smoking, teen violence, obesity, cancer, and HIV. In the year 2000, the **U.S. Surgeon General** issued a report entitled *Oral Health in America*. One of the important themes of this report was that **“oral health is integral to maintaining general health, and oral and general health should not be interpreted as separate entities.”** Contrary to popular belief, **oral health** means **more than healthy teeth**, and you cannot be considered “healthy” overall without good oral health.

The 1st ever **Surgeon General’s** report on *Oral Health* highlighted the impact of dental and oral diseases in our society. Treatment of oral diseases accounts for a significant proportion of total U.S. health care cost, with an estimated **\$53.8 billion** spent on dental services per year. Dental caries (*tooth decay/cavity*) and periodontal disease (*gum disease*) represent **two of the most widespread diseases in the world**, ahead of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (ie. high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes). It is estimated that at least 35% of the U.S. population 30 years of age and older is afflicted with some form of gum disease. Additionally, by the age of 17, more than 80% of the adolescent population is affected by dental caries (cavities). Oral diseases and oral manifestations of systemic diseases can create major functional deficits and impair individuals’ abilities to eat, drink, speak, and even smile.

The scope of dentistry and treatment of oral diseases involves treatment of conditions beyond just those that affect teeth. *Craniofacial (jaws and skull) deformities* are among the most common of all birth defects, with cleft lip and cleft palate among the more common birth defects in the U.S., occurring in about 1-2 of 1,000 births. *Oral and pharyngeal (throat) cancer* is the 6th most common cancer in the developed world, and each year, more than 7,400 Americans die as a result of it. The salivary glands and their production of adequate amounts of saliva are an often overlooked necessity for oral health. The saliva functions to lubricate the oral cavity and facilitate speech, fight infection, neutralize acid, and start the digestive process. Impaired function or obstruction of salivary glands can lead to a condition called xerostomia (*dry mouth*). An estimated 40,000 people lose salivary gland function annually as a result of radiation treatment for head and neck cancer, and the resulting loss of saliva flow markedly impairs quality of life.

In sum, oral diseases and their conditions have broad impacts on general health and well-being, and reciprocally, many systemic diseases have oral manifestations. Fortunately for dentistry, many conditions affecting the mouth can be prevented or easily addressed if one sees a dentist **AT LEAST TWO TIMES PER YEAR** for regular cleanings and check-ups. Because many systemic diseases affect the mouth (diabetes, blood disorders, endocrine disorders, liver diseases, HIV), dentists are often the 1st to identify these systemic issues and make the appropriate referral to see a physician for follow-up. In between these twice a year dental visits, it is even more important that one practice good oral hygiene habits including brushing **AT LEAST TWICE A DAY** and **FLOSSING ONCE A DAY**. In taking these relatively simple measures *in maintaining good oral health, one can help assure sustaining good overall health.*