

body+soul

Whole tooth

A bright, white smile looks great, but can also keep your body in tip-top shape. By **Helen Signy**.

Do you suffer from headaches, stomach troubles, high blood pressure or kidney problems? Then maybe there's one part of your body whose health you've overlooked – your teeth. Strange as it may sound, there's mounting evidence that good oral health is essential for your general wellbeing – and that neglecting your mouth can result in a series of otherwise unexplained illnesses elsewhere in your body.

The acknowledgement of the mouth's role in general health has spawned a growing number of dentists who take a holistic approach to their patients. Holistic dentists don't treat the teeth in isolation from the rest of the body, but take into consideration their patients' general health in every dental decision they make.

"It's all connected," says Dr Ron Ehrlich, of the Sydney Holistic Dental Centre. "A third of your body's neurology is focused around the mouth. Your mouth is the start of your digestive tract, there are lots of blood vessels and bacteria, and it's where we get our air supply. If you have fillings, their wear may cause you to inhale or swallow the by-products. And any infection in the mouth can predispose you to other things."

The theory is that low level infection in the mouth, for example from periodontal (gum) disease or a decaying tooth, can compromise your immune system and exacerbate other health complaints.

But before you grab your dental floss in a panic, remember: having dental problems doesn't automatically mean you're going to get sick – and fixing your teeth won't automatically cure your chronic illness – it's just worth looking after your teeth!

Medical literature shows a connection between oral care and general health. Recent studies from the American Academy of Periodontology and The United States National Institutes of Health link periodontal disease to a variety of health problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes complications and low birth weight.

"Quite often dentists can identify oral presentations of systemic disease such as periodontal disease in diabetics and smokers, loss of tooth substance due to gastric reflux, ulcers in individuals who are anaemic or have inflammatory bowel disease, or viral and fungal infections in people with compromised immune systems," says Dr Anastasia Georgiou, a specialist in oral medicine at Westmead Hospital.

"This relationship works in both directions. The mouth can have an effect on the body, in particular in patients who have a predisposed heart condition such as "leaking valves" – oral bacteria can enter the bloodstream which may lead to infective endocarditis, an infection within the heart."

Holistic dentists believe there are four main areas in which your dental health may compromise your general health.

gum disease

The mouth harbours millions of bacteria, which in many people lead to tooth decay and gum disease. Eating too many refined carbohydrates and not keeping your mouth clean are the real culprits here – but holistic dentistry says the problem may be much more serious than the need for a filling or two.

If your gums bleed when you brush or floss, you're likely to have periodontal disease, the most common infection in adults and children. Dr Ehrlich says the stress this places on your body, combined with the production of free radicals, is what can make you sick.

A holistic dentist will look at why you may have gum disease – for example your nutrition or your body's pH balance – and will thoroughly scale and clean the area.

root canal

Like gum disease, a decayed tooth can become infected and affect your overall health. Decayed teeth used to be extracted, but now most dentists prefer to save a tooth at all costs, and usually this is done with root canal treatment.

The problem with this, say holistic dentists, is that the nature of a tooth's root canal means it's impossible to totally sterilise it. Dental dams and lasers can help, but many people who have root canal surgery are unknowingly left with a low-grade chronic mouth infection, which can only be picked up on an X-ray.

"If a tooth decays and that decay is allowed to proceed through to the nerve and the nerve dies, you have gangrenous tissue," says Dr Ehrlich.

"This gangrenous tissue rotting in your mouth within the tooth and the jaw bone releases toxins that enter the bloodstream and can affect your health."

One view is that this infection is not significant because most people's immune systems cope. But holistic dentists base the decision of whether to do a root canal on the patient's medical history, and may opt for an extraction if they feel it's in the best interests of the person as a whole.

amalgam fillings

Long the preferred choice of dentists, amalgam fillings are made up of 50 per cent mercury, one of the most toxic metals there is. And there's evidence that mercury leaks out of fillings.

The Australian Dental Association believes amalgam fillings are safe, based on the fact there is no unequivocal evidence of any hazard derived from the mercury in fillings.

Nevertheless, the World Health Organisation acknowledges that mercury from amalgam fillings does contribute to the overall load of mercury in our bodies, along with that derived from other

sources such as deep-sea fish. And the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) recommends that children, pregnant women and people with kidney disease, should not have amalgam fillings placed.

They also recommend that care be taken when removing an amalgam filling by using a dental dam, to prevent patients swallowing or inhaling mercury.

Dr Emmanuel Varipatis, a doctor and a specialist in clinical metal toxicology from YourHealth in Manly, believes all fillings leak. Dr Varipatis says the resulting mercury poisoning can contribute to some chronic illnesses if the detoxification systems in a person's body are not working properly.

"You don't need very much of it to damage people. It accumulates in the brain, heart, arteries, kidneys and liver especially, and can be a poison for all of those organs," he says.

Holistic dentists believe there is no safe level of mercury leakage, and never place amalgam fillings. They generally use ceramic-based materials that are tested to check they are compatible with the individual patient.

While they don't recommend everyone with amalgam fillings should rush out and have them replaced – it's often during this process that mercury is released – they do assess each patient individually to see whether they would benefit from having new fillings.

your bite

It's not just whether your teeth meet properly, but whether you grind or clench your teeth, that can lead to other problems. If the mouth's muscles are overworked you may get headaches, ringing in your ears, or neck or joint pain.

"If your bite's not right it can put the whole muscular skeletal system out," says Dr Ben Olstein, a holistic dentist in Melbourne. "It can also lead to an energy imbalance and stress throughout the body."

Holistic dentists use various techniques to improve the bite, including fillings, crowns and splints.

Holistic dentistry is not mainstream – yet – but dental health is becoming more recognised as a factor in general health.

A move toward integrated health care means you'll often find a dentist in an allied health centre along with GPs, physiotherapists and dietitians. And there is a growing number of doctors who are aware of the importance of the teeth and mouth in patients' wellbeing.

"Oral health needs to be in combination with general health – fitness, diet and regular medical checks," says Dr Anastasia Georgiou, a specialist in oral medicine at Westmead Hospital. "It's having an active approach to your health."

Neglecting your teeth can result in other unexplained illnesses in your body. Here's how to minimise the risks.

- Have regular dental checkups – at least every six months.
- Brush and floss properly twice a day.
- Consider having a material other than amalgam the next time you have a filling.
- Improve your diet. Refined carbohydrates are bad for your teeth.
- Find a dentist you feel comfortable with so you can voice your concerns.
- Find a doctor who acknowledges the role of dental health in overall health.