

The Dental and Pulmonary Diseases CONNECTION

Cavities and gum diseases can make certain lung problems worse.

Infection

Dental cavities and gum disease are bacterial infections.

Germ can be inhaled into the lungs on tiny droplets of saliva. They usually don't damage healthy lungs because our body's natural defenses kill and remove the bacteria. In lungs that are dealing with diseases, the bacteria can intensify infections and inflammation, which can make breathing more difficult.

Inflammation

Inflammation is part of our defense system against harmful bacteria, pollen, allergens, smoke from cigarettes or serious pollution. The word inflammation means "in flames" and describes what happens when the area becomes red, swollen, hot, and possibly painful.

When one part of the body is dealing with a stubborn infection, like gum disease, not only does that area become inflamed and damaged, but the rest of the body is sent an "alert signal" about the problem. That can increase inflammation that may be going on somewhere else in the body, including in the lungs.

Persistent infections or irritants can create chronic inflammation, which can be very harmful. Ongoing dental infections can have damaging effects beyond the teeth, including intensifying lung problems and breathing distress.

Dry Mouth

Cavities and gum diseases that increase the risk of lung infections and inflammation can develop more easily in a dry mouth since saliva helps protect against those problems. Yet some of the drugs used to ease breathing, as well as medical oxygen and CPAP, can create a dry mouth.

An artificial saliva product can help, and chewing sugarless gum or sucking on sugarless candy can stimulate production of saliva. If on supplemental oxygen, including CPAP, use humidification when possible.

Prevent Harmful Dental Problems

- » **Remove the bacteria that cause cavities and gum disease** by brushing your teeth twice daily with a soft bristle brush, and floss (or use a floss substitute like opal pix) once a day. Thorough and daily is important because the germs re-attach to the teeth and will cause problems if not kept off.
- » **Full and partial dentures should be cleaned daily** and soaked overnight to remove the bacteria that could otherwise be breathed into your lungs.
- » **Use fluoridated toothpaste** that also has antibacterial ingredients, such as peroxide with baking soda, to protect teeth from decay and also kill bacteria not removed with brushing and flossing. Ask your dentist if a fluoride and/or an antimicrobial mouth rinse would be helpful.
- » **Attach a spacer to aerosol inhalers** to direct the medicine to the back of your mouth. And rinse after using inhalers to remove excess medication that may remain in your mouth to prevent thrush, a yeast infection that creates sores on the tongue, cheeks, and tonsils.
- » **Have dental exams at least twice a year** so problems can be identified early and treated quickly.

Breathe easy during dental appointments

- » **Schedule appointments when it is easier to breathe.** Coughing, for example, may be more frequent and intense in the morning for some people with COPD and other pulmonary diseases. If so, afternoon appointments may be preferred.
- » **If you use an inhaler, bring it to appointments.** Using an inhaler may be helpful if you get stressed during dental procedures.
- » **How do you want to be seated?** Dental chairs are frequently placed in a reclined position. It may be easier to breathe if you are sitting up. Tell your dentist what you prefer.

YOUR FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT

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