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Diabetes and Oral Health

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Diabetes is a lifelong disease. According to the Center for Disease Control, the number of Americans diagnosed with diabetes is 16 million, with 54 million in pre-diabetes.

To understand diabetes, it is important to first understand the normal process of food metabolism. Several things happen when food is digested:

A sugar called glucose enters the bloodstream. Glucose is a source of fuel for the body.

An organ called the pancreas makes insulin. The role of insulin is to move glucose from the bloodstream into muscle, fat and liver cells, where it can be used as fuel.

People with diabetes have high blood sugar. This is because their pancreas does not make enough insulin or their muscle, fat and liver cells do not respond to insulin normally, or both.

There are two major types of diabetes:

Type 1 diabetes is usually diagnosed in childhood. The body makes little or no insulin, and daily injections of insulin are needed to sustain life.

Type 2 diabetes is far more common than Type 1 and makes up most of diabetes cases. It usually occurs in adulthood. The pancreas does not make enough insulin to keep blood glucose levels normal, often because the body does not respond well to the insulin. Many people with Type 2 do not know they have it, although it is a serious condition. Type 2 is becoming more common due to the growing number of older Americans, increasing obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and failure to exercise.

Some of the symptoms include frequent urination, excessive thirst, hunger, fatigue, weight loss, and blurry vision. However, because Type 2 diabetes develops slowly, some people with high blood sugar experience no symptoms at all.

There is no cure for diabetes. Treatment involves medicines, diet and exercise to control blood sugar and prevent symptoms and complications.

Connection to Periodontitis (gum disease)

Diabetes is now recognized as the most important systemic risk factor for gum disease with the exception of smoking.

In a study conducted at Columbia University on adolescents with diabetes, the data indicates that periodontal disease as a complication of diabetes occurs early in life. The authors suggest that, because periodontal disease can be prevented and cured, young patients with diabetes should have a complete oral examination.

Dental implants have become a popular option for replacement of missing teeth. Advantages associated with dental implants include the ability to replace single or multiple missing teeth without altering the adjacent teeth. A diabetic patient has a higher risk of implant failure.

At the University of Athens in Greece, clinical studies in diabetic patients suggested that when the diabetes is well controlled, dental implants are suitable. However, because diabetes is still a risk factor for dental implants, it is imperative to follow a guideline for the diabetic patients. Glycemic levels should be under control along with the patient's physician approval.

Since uncontrolled diabetes is a major risk factor to gum disease, diabetic children, adolescents and adults should have routine preventive oral health care.