

# Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey

## Regular Visits to the Dentist Can Save Your Life

We recognize the connection between good oral care and good overall health. If you have not seen your dentist recently, make an appointment right away.

Did you know that your dentist can spot serious health risks like...  
oral cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and premature birth?

Most people would never think a trip to their dentist would actually save their lives. Dental appointments are typically made to either relieve pain or help maintain a beautiful smile. But, we should really think of our dentist as a health care provider and part of the team of physicians that helps us to maintain our overall health. Dentists, after all, are physicians of the mouth. Although this may seem like a new concept to some people, dentists are trained to diagnose diseases of the mouth in both the hard tissue (teeth) and soft tissue (tongue, roof of the mouth, lips, and gums). During every visit, the dentist inspects these tissues for any changes that could be the warning signs of disease. A regular visit to your dentist will not only help you and your family maintain your overall health...but it could also save your life.

### **Oral Cancer**

Over 30,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral cancer this year. Oral cancer has a higher death rate than cancers of the ovaries, cervix, liver, brain, testes, kidney, and skin, as well as Hodgkin's disease. If diagnosed early, there is a better chance for survival. Your dentist is trained to observe changes in the soft tissue of the mouth and recognize precancerous lesions. These changes may include ulcers on the lips, white patches on the cheeks, or ulcers under the tongue.

### **Heart Disease**

Studies have shown a connection between gum disease, heart disease, and stroke. Gum disease makes gum tissue weaker, allowing oral bacteria to enter the blood stream. Dental bacteria can cause blood clots or a clumping together of blood cells. Blood clots can travel through the blood stream, causing a stroke or heart attack. Regular visits to your dentist, along with consultations and treatments by a periodontist (gum specialist), will assist in removing this risk factor.

### **Diabetes**

Routine dental visits can do more than keep your teeth clean. They also provide early detection of serious health risks like diabetes. Recent studies show that periodontal disease is one of the complications brought on by diabetes; a staggering one-third of people with diabetes have severe periodontal disease. And, if you have already been diagnosed with diabetes, periodontal disease can make it more difficult for you to control blood sugar levels.

Many people with diabetes were initially diagnosed with the disease as a result of a routine dental visit. Your dentist is not the health care provider who can diagnose whether or not you have diabetes; however, dentists often suspect diabetes during their treatment of gum disease.

Periodontal disease is considered one of the complications of diabetes. In some people, the presence of periodontal disease decreases their ability to control blood sugar. When a person treated for gum disease shows no improvement following treatment and good oral hygiene, a referral to his or her physician is in order.

Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey strongly believes in working with our members to help them take control of their health. We have the ability to integrate medical and dental care to provide comprehensive solutions to your health care needs through our dental awareness programs. If you are a Horizon BCBSNJ member and have diabetes, you will receive valuable educational material highlighting the link between diabetes and good oral health.

### **Pregnancy**

Recent studies have investigated the connection between premature births and gum disease. Some investigators speculate that as many as 18 percent of all cases of premature births may be associated with gum disease. Pregnant women produce substances known as regulators, which determine when the process of birth is to occur. Once these regulators reach a certain level, they signal the birth process to begin. Gum disease produces regulators, known as prostaglandins. In a pregnant woman, prostaglandins send out a false signal to the body, thereby initiating the birth process prematurely. Regularly scheduled maintenance visits to dentists are critical to maintaining healthy gums, especially prior to and during pregnancy.

Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey hopes that you make an appointment with your dentist when you are in pain or need a cleaning. At the same time, please consider how important it is to see your dentist regularly to detect the early warning signs of problems that could affect your overall health. These visits could actually save your life.

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