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# THE MOUTH–BODY CONNECTION: WHY DENTAL CARE IS ESSENTIAL FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV

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Oral health is a vital, yet often underestimated, part of comprehensive HIV management. The mouth is closely linked to the body's overall health and, for people living with HIV, it is often the first area to reveal signs of systemic changes. Because HIV can weaken the immune system, everyday oral organisms can cause more frequent, persistent, and severe infections. This makes regular dental care a non-negotiable component of maintaining good health.

Several oral conditions are commonly associated with HIV. These include fungal infections such as oral candidiasis (thrush), viral infections like oral hairy leukoplakia and herpes, and advanced gum disease (periodontitis). Medication-related dry mouth (xerostomia) can also increase the risk of cavities and persistent discomfort. Identifying and treating these issues early can prevent complications and protect overall health.

Neglecting oral health has direct consequences for HIV management. Oral pain can make eating difficult, affecting nutrition and energy levels. It may also interfere with daily routines, including medication adherence. Ongoing oral infections can trigger systemic inflammation, placing further strain on the immune system and potentially impacting health outcomes.



### **Action Plan for a Healthy Mouth**

Taking care of your mouth is a proactive step toward safeguarding your general health. Here's how to stay on track:

#### **1. Partner with Your Dentist**

- Let your dentist know about your HIV status so they can provide the most appropriate care. Schedule check-ups and cleanings at least every six months—or more frequently if recommended.

#### **2. Strengthen Your Daily Routine**

- Brush twice daily using a soft-bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss every day to remove plaque between teeth.
- Use an alcohol-free mouthwash if advised, as alcohol-based products can worsen dry mouth.

#### **3. Speak Up About Changes**

- Report any new symptoms, such as mouth sores, bleeding gums, dry mouth, or pain, to your dentist and healthcare provider as soon as they appear. Early management prevents complications.

## Don't Skip the Dentist

Managing HIV means taking care of your whole body, and that includes your oral health. A strong oral care plan supports long-term wellness and reduces the risk of avoidable complications. Make full use of your medical scheme's dental benefits for preventive care, as early treatment is both cost-effective and crucial to overall well-being.



## References

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