

# Waging war against PLAQUE

## Hygienists leading fight to protect oral, overall health

By Roberta Baker  
Union Leader Staff

**L**EA ANNE HANEY, a dental hygienist at Northeast Delta Dental, has soldiered on the front lines of mouth care for 45 years, using her gloved fingers, dental tools and jets of water to clean teeth and gums and probe for emerging problems.

Her job goes beyond spotting and scraping off plaque. Hygienists are among the first to detect medical conditions that leave telltale signs in the mouth.

When someone goes for a semi-annual or more frequent cleaning, Haney looks for evidence of oral cancer, diabetes, GERD or gastroesophageal reflux disease, anemia, HIV, osteoporosis and dry mouth — a condition that can wreak havoc with oral health.

“I love to talk about tooth-brush technique,” said Haney. She also asks about diet (including snacks and beverages), underlying medical conditions and current medications, prescription and over-the-counter.

She scans for lesions under the tongue and on the top and sides of the mouth, spots where tissue is raised or discolored, areas of inflammation and anything brewing at the top of the throat.

“Dental hygienists and dentists see over 100 diseases that show symptoms in the mouth,” said Haney, who also visits schools and nursing homes as a public health dental hygienist.

“Systemic diseases have oral manifestations. The dentist is diagnosing and treating disease. I’m looking at a patient’s risk factors and individualizing their routine hygiene. I’m a prevention specialist.”

### A worrisome increase in plaque

A precursor to problems is plaque, which builds up on teeth at the gum line. Plaque, a combination of bacteria, saliva



PROVIDED BY DR. MITCH COURET

Army Private First Class Sheldon Wright checks his smile in the mirror after dental work from Dr. Mitch Courret at his office in Goffstown.

and food particles, is the sticky, pale film that forms on teeth and promotes decay.

Laura Cailler, a hygienist at Nashua Dental Associates, said the switch to remote work during and after COVID seemed to compound the plaque buildup problem. Morning mouth care routines slid or became skewed while people were working at home.

“We’re seeing more plaque than we used to,” and it appears to be forming more quickly, she added.

Lapsed mouth care and diets high in sugar and processed food are the likely culprits. Processed foods, flavored seltzers and energy drinks, which are loaded with sugar or artificial sweeteners, and

even apple cider and kombucha can make the mouth more acidic, dentists say. This erodes tooth enamel and hastens the buildup of plaque.

Hot spots include the outside of upper molars and behind the lower front teeth, Cailler said.

“Think about Oreos. It’s the sugar content and you chew it. Everyone thinks you swallow it and it’s gone. But sugar adheres to the sides of teeth and stays between the teeth,” said Dr. Mitch Courret, dentist at Goffstown Smiles and chief dental officer at Northeast Delta Dental. He tells his patients who drink Coke or soft drinks not to sip throughout the day, but drink them within one hour, then rinse their

mouths with water, so their mouths are not continuously bathed in sugar.

“Whenever you leave anything on your teeth, the bacteria have dinner. If you don’t floss and brush, you continue to feed them. And the gums get inflamed,” Courret said.

Cailler said she has seen a spike in patients in their 20s and 30s with advanced tooth decay, which could come from frequent energy drinks and smoking or vaping.

“A lot of new patients in their 20s have been coming in with intense decay and teeth loss. It’s really jarring,” she said. “Nine out to ten times you can tell if someone’s using a vap-

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### No Flavors this week

The monthly NHMedical section takes the place of this week’s Flavors section. Flavors, with Our Gourmet, will return next week.

## Gum disease: A mouthful of problems that affect the whole body

By Roberta Baker  
Union Leader Staff

You see your gums when you brush your teeth or smile in the mirror. And you rarely give them a second thought.

But they’re a major player in your overall health.

According to data from the American Dental Association, more than 42% of adults who have teeth suffer from advanced gum disease, or periodontitis.

A 2023 report published by Harvard Medical School found that periodontal disease increases the risk of heart disease, chronic respiratory illness, dementia and pregnancy complications. And it’s the leading cause of tooth loss, which affects almost one in four people age 60 and older.

The effects of periodontal disease “are far reaching beyond the mouth,” said Dr. Michael Goldberg, a consultant for Northeast Delta Dental and a periodontist for 31 years.

Gingivitis, the most common gum inflammation, can be controlled and reversed by good mouth care at home and regular cleaning by a dental hygienist. But plaque, the soft, whitish gunk that builds up on teeth near the gums, can harden into tartar. When bacteria accumulate along the gums, and plaque and tartar progress unabated, gum infections result.

“It’s early stages it doesn’t cause pain. Nobody wakes up and says, ‘I have to go to the dentist.’ The only red flag is gum bleeding,” said Goldberg. “Healthy tissue doesn’t bleed.”

In the beginning stages of periodontal disease, gums may turn red and become swollen and tender to the touch. They may become sore when you eat. Some people notice a bad odor or bad taste. “If you see blood in sink basin” repeatedly, he said, that’s a sign you shouldn’t ignore.

When bacteria go beneath the gum line, their byproducts start to erode the bone. And the bone loss is irreversible.

“It’s the bone that holds teeth in place,” said Goldberg. “Think of the gums as shingles on a roof that resist the rain,” shielding the bone

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# Skipping the dentist? Here’s why it could cost more than just your smile

By Roberta Baker  
Union Leader Staff

When Dr. Suman Reddivari gazes into the mouths of patients at Manchester Family Dentistry, he scans portraits of their eating, drinking and smoking habits, oral hygiene routines and overall health. He sees threats that can morph into serious, wallet-popping problems if not addressed.

Diets high in processed foods and sugar, Reddivari said, coupled with insufficient tooth and gum care and infrequent or non-existent dental checkups, are contributing to a rise in cavities — a universal ailment that must be treated before decay and infection progress to something worse.

Acidic beverages, such as soft drinks, energy drinks and seltzers flavored with fruit juice, higher rates of marijuana use, and an aging population taking multiple medications — sometimes a dizzying list — are leading to more complaints of dry mouth, he said.

That condition sounds harmless enough, but insufficient saliva causes a host of tooth and gum ailments and reduces someone’s

ability to fight infection elsewhere in the body.

Dentists can be the first to spot emerging medical complaints. For instance, bruxism or teeth grinding can be a sign of sleep apnea, which interrupts breathing during sleep. A large tongue that covers a small throat opening is a risk. Sleep apnea, which Reddivari said he’s seeing more frequently, increases the risk of heart attacks and dementia.

“My job is not just treating teeth,” said the Manchester dentist. “It’s connecting the dots. All I can do is give (patients) a way to fix things or maintain things. As a dentist, the best thing I can do is educate people about their options. Dental treatment is expensive,” he said, “but the cheapest day is today” — before any condition becomes much more embedded and complex.

“People have to put importance on dental health,” he said. “That’s the biggest hurdle.”

Dr. Jeffrey Vachon of Vachon Dental in Manchester, president-elect of the New Hampshire



PROVIDED BY DR. JEFFREY VACHON

Dr. Jeffrey Vachon of Vachon Dental, demonstrates a procedure on his daughter Joanna in the Red Sox/Fenway Park-themed operatory at his office in Manchester. He also has a Boston Bruins-themed room. “It causes fun conversation!” he said.

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## Dental Care

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Dental Society, said Americans overall seem to be more aware and attentive to oral health than decades ago, but he wishes they would take care of their mouths as much as they tend to their bodies.

COVID led to lapsed dental checkups and skipped or delayed procedures, he said, resulting in higher costs for correcting problems that simmered.

During periods of high inflation, economic uncertainty and belt tightening, dental care can drop to the bottom of the to-do list.

“I would love for a paradigm shift to prioritizing oral health as much as they do their overall, systemic health,” said Vachon. “That’s going to be the best for our population, regardless of what toothbrush they use.”

Teeth and gums usually, but not always, warn us with pain and recurrent bleeding when they’re ailing. But sometimes disease is brewing below the gums or inside the teeth in places we can’t see or feel.

Here’s a quick guide to common issues that warrant our attention.

### Dry mouth

People are not always aware they have dry mouth until there’s a 70% reduction in saliva, said Reddivari.

At root is reduced saliva production. Saliva lubricates your mouth, protects your teeth, neutralizes acid, and helps fight decay and hold dentures in place. It makes it easier to speak and eat, according to the American Dental Association.

Smoking, vaping, alcohol and caffeine can worsen dry mouth. So can chemotherapy and radiation treatments for cancer. But a main and increasing cause is polypharmacy — or taking multiple medications

for multiple conditions.

“Sometimes individual meds cause dry mouth,” said Vachon. “Sometimes it’s the interactions of medications.” About 400 medications can cause dry mouth, including some for anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, allergies and sinus congestion, according to the Journal of the American Dental Association.

People with diabetes or Alzheimer’s disease, those who’ve had a stroke, and people who smoke or chew tobacco may experience dry mouth. Regularly drinking alcohol or caffeinated beverages can aggravate it.

People who smoke marijuana may also drink soda, energy drinks and consume lots of snacks — “a deadly combo,” said Reddivari.

It’s important to tell your dentist about all the prescription and over-the-counter medications you’re taking.

Decay will start quicker and can become rampant, especially in older patients who take an assortment of medications, said Laura Cailler, a dental hygienist at Nashua Dental Associates. Despite good hygiene, new cavities can form under existing dental work because of a lack of saliva. Without adequate saliva, the mouth becomes more acidic, which hastens the break down of teeth and gums.

The American Dental Association tells patients with dry mouth: Drink water throughout the day or suck on crushed ice. Chew or suck on sugar-free gum or candy. Limit or steer clear of hard-to-chew, spicy, or dry foods, including crackers and chips. Use lip balm, and try running a humidifier at night.

### Sleep apnea

An estimated 30 million Americans, including chil-



PROVIDED BY DR. SUMAN REDDIVARI

Dr. Suman Reddivari of Manchester Family Dental said: “People have to put importance on dental health. That’s the biggest hurdle.”

dren, are estimated to suffer from obstructive sleep apnea, which interrupts normal breathing and can have major health repercussions if not addressed.

For decades the standard treatment has been CPAP, an air-pumping machine connected by tubes to a face mask, which forces air into the windpipe while people sleep.

Compliance studies have shown that only 30% to 40% of people with CPAP con-

tinue to use them, said Dr. Stephen Cohen, a dentist at Nashua Dental Associates who is trained in sleep dentistry.

Dental appliances that pull back the jaw, allowing the tongue to relax without covering the throat, can be less cumbersome and better tolerated than CPAP, especially for patients with mild to moderate sleep apnea.

Dentists can’t officially diagnose sleep apnea, but

they can spot signs in the mouth and consult with physicians who can order sleep studies and prescribe treatment options.

### Impacted wisdom teeth

According to the Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic, wisdom teeth — our third molars — typically emerge between ages 17 and 26, and not everyone develops them. About 53% of the general population has at least one wisdom

tooth.

A partially impacted wisdom tooth shows some of its crown. A fully impacted wisdom tooth never breaks through the gums. Wisdom teeth can grow sideways into a neighboring tooth, straight up or down, or horizontally within the jawbone.

Symptoms of ailing wisdom teeth include red, swollen, tender or bleeding gums, pain and swelling around the jaw, bad breath or a bad taste in your mouth, or difficulty opening your mouth.

Dental x-rays at regular intervals can spot impacted wisdom teeth before any symptoms start. There’s no need to remove them if they’re not causing problems.

### The root of the problem

Roughly 15 million root canals are performed yearly across the U.S., according to the Cleveland Clinic.

“People are wanting to save their teeth more and root canals are a way to do that,” said Vachon at the Dental Society.

Root canal procedures remove inflamed or infected pulp on the inside of a tooth, which is then cleaned, disinfected, filled and sealed. The goal is to eliminate bacteria from the tooth’s root canal, prevent reinfection and salvage the natural tooth.

According to the American Association of Endodontists, root canals are often needed for cracked teeth, deep cavities and decay and infection simmering under previous fillings. The treatment is similar to getting a filling, and saving the tooth helps preserve normal chewing, bite force and tooth sensation.

Generally, restoring the tooth is less expensive than extracting and replacing it with an implant or bridge.

# SAVE NEW HAMPSHIRE NURSING HOME CARE



**Solid bipartisan efforts to improve care funding must continue. Through January, wage costs alone for nursing homes were up 34% since February 2020. If facilities can't afford to hire staff within the limits of state Medicaid reimbursement they must deny admissions. This can prevent hospitals from discharging patients, and forces Granite Staters to wait for vital care.**

For more information, see **[savenhseniors.com](https://savenhseniors.com)**

**MORE HELP in Concord is needed so facilities can recruit, and retain, staff to serve the most vulnerable Granite Staters.**

Paid for by the N.H. Health Care Association





## Plaque

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ing device. You can really see heavy plaque on their teeth.”

### Select your tools

When it comes to prevention at home, the rule of thumb is to floss between teeth, then brush with a soft brush for at least two minutes. And, if possible, Reddivari said, follow with a water flosser and a fluoride rinse.

Mouth care rituals vary greatly between individuals — what they will tolerate and make time for.

“Many are not doing it effectively,” said Cailler.

When it comes to toothpaste, Cailler tells most patients to choose a basic one with fluoride and a taste they like. She said whitening toothpastes can abrade tooth enamel over time.

People with sensitive teeth should select a product designed for sensitive teeth. An example is Sensodyne. Folks who avoid fluoride can opt instead for toothpastes that contain hydroxyapatite, which has been recommended for rebuilding tooth enamel.

Haney points patients to CloSys, an ADA-recommended toothpaste with fewer additives, an anti-microbial agent and no sodium lauryl sulfate, mint (which can irritate), dyes or alcohol.

When it comes to toothbrushes, soft is the golden rule.

“Use a hard toothbrush to clean tile grout, not your mouth. Your teeth can handle it, but gum tissue cannot,” said Cailler.

Pain with brushing or flossing can come from pushing too hard. “You don’t have to use a lot of pressure to be effective,” Cailler said.

### The importance of routine checkups

Dental inspections at regular intervals should start within six months of



NASHUA DENTAL ASSOCIATES

Dental hygienist Laura Cailler works with a patient at Nashua Dental Associates.

the first tooth that comes in and before a child’s first birthday, according to the most recent guidelines from the American Dental Association.

While attention to dental health appears to be rising among most Americans, early care and guidance is often missed, and it’s important for a lifelong healthy mouth, said Dr. Jeffrey Vachon, incoming president of the New Hampshire Dental Society and a dentist in Manchester.

Dr. Mitch Couret, dentist at Goffstown Smiles and chief dental officer at Northeast Delta Dental, said fear and finances often determine how often someone goes to the dentist. People can be dissuaded by unpleasant past experiences and unsettling stories from family and friends. Some are motivated by appearance concerns. Dental care, especially when delayed or complex, can become expensive quickly.

“Patients have to be proactive rather than reactive,”

said Dr. Michael Goldberg, a gum specialist and consultant to Northeast Delta Dental. “Prevention is worth its weight in gold.”

In the end, pain drives patients to dentists.

“People will brush, spit out and see blood and not act on it because it isn’t causing pain,” said Goldberg, whereas a toothache, large swelling or broken tooth brings people in as soon as possible.

Twice-yearly dental cleanings and checkups have been recommended for more than 100 years, said Haney.

Every nine months or once a year may be sufficient for people who don’t get cavities and have hard teeth and pale pink gums, she said. But those with frequent or recent decay, tartar buildup, pain or bleeding with brushing or flossing, or any known mouth, gum, tooth ailment or weakness or chronic medical issue are often advised to go every three or four months.

A large advertisement for Delta Dental. The background is a green triangle pointing upwards. On the left, a man with dark hair and a beard is smiling and holding a smartphone. In the top right corner, there is a smaller inset photo of a man and a woman smiling. The text on the right side of the triangle reads: "Delta Dental has more satisfied members", "89% member satisfaction rating", "Source: 2024 Delta Dental Data", the Delta Dental logo, and "nedelta.com".

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