



Female lips in pop art style with bubble. Lettering Wow inside bubble. Retro comic illustration with halftone background. Vector

HEALTH / MEDICAL MATTERS

The secrets of your mouth:  
How dentists can spot your  
bad habits in just ONE check  
up, from excessive gum  
chewing to a poor diet (and  
what you've been up to  
between the sheets!)



**LUISA METCALFE** Health & lifestyle writer

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A visit to the dentist is a nerve-racking event, from the fear of hearing bad news about your pearly whites to the prospect of emerging with sore, swollen gums after they've been poked around.

But not only can your dentist see that you need new fillings, a check-up can reveal a range of bad habits and embarrassing behaviour you'd be only too happy to keep secret – from smoking and thumb-sucking to being a mouth-breather.

'The mouth is the gateway to the rest of the body,' says dentist Dr Vikas Prinja, from north London's Apple Dental Studios, whose video called Things Your Dentist Knows About You went viral recently on TikTok [[@thelondondentist](#)].

Here he discusses the secrets that our mouths reveal – and why only a dentist can spot them...

## YOU'RE A GUM-CHEWER





You might think that you've managed to keep your chewing gum habit under wraps, but your dentist will be able to tell if you're chomping on the sticky stuff day in, day out.

They might also be able to see whether you choose sugary varieties such as the classic Juicy Fruit and new 'artisanal' brands such as Simply Gum, which uses cane sugar for sweetening, or opt for sugar-free brands.

'Sugar-free gum lowers your chance of developing tooth decay as it stimulates saliva production, which neutralises acid, so you see lower rates of tooth decay,' says Dr Prinja.

'But if you're chewing gum that has sugar in it, you're holding sugar in the mouth for a long period of time so we'll see people with decay, particularly on the biting surfaces of the teeth.'

In rare cases, chewing too much gum can even cause hairline fractures in the teeth. 'People who chew with a lot of biting force or whose teeth are misaligned can have this problem,' he says. 'If you have a crossbite (where the upper and lower teeth are slightly out of kilter) or you chew gum on one side only, the other side will rub together which can result in "micro-cracks" in the teeth.

'You can wear down the teeth, but you'd have to chew a lot of gum for that to happen.'

## YOU SUCK YOUR THUMB





Thumb-sucking is common in young children, when it's relatively harmless. But youngsters who continue with the habit well into childhood and beyond could be causing permanent damage to their teeth and even their jaws.

'Thumb-sucking is normal from about two to four years of age, but if you carry it on after about five the thumb can put enough pressure on the jaw that it alters how it forms,' Dr Prinja says.

'Thumb-suckers can develop an anterior open bite, which means that the upper front teeth aren't touching the bottom ones. The top and bottom teeth are flared out from years of the thumb pushing them.

'People who have this have higher rates of cracking teeth and broken fillings. This is because the back teeth are touching but the front teeth aren't. When you chew you bite solely on the back teeth, so you're putting all of the jaw force on them which means more wear and tear.'

Braces are usually the answer, but Dr Prinja notes, 'in some cases you need jaw surgery to fix it.'

## YOU HAVE AN EATING DISORDER OR ACID REFLUX





People suffering from an eating disorder may not be able to keep their problem hidden at the dentist's.

'We spot bulimia first in a lot of cases,' says Dr Prinja. 'It does something very specific to the teeth: the repeated vomiting means that teeth are exposed to the strong acids in the stomach.'

'The upper teeth, specifically, get eroded away and look very yellow because the enamel is worn away which exposes the dentine underneath. You end up with sensitive, translucent-looking teeth.'

However, there is a solution for those in recovery: 'We can fix the damage by adding white filling material or veneers to the back surface of the teeth,' he says.

Acid reflux, when stomach acid makes its way back up the throat, can also erode teeth. 'Higher acid levels in the mouth leads to higher levels of tooth decay, dry mouth and sore throat.'

Anyone vulnerable to tooth decay from a high acid level should ask their dentist for Duraphat, a prescription-only toothpaste with higher levels of fluoride, which helps strengthen teeth.



## YOU'VE HAD UNPROTECTED SEX



It might make for an awkward conversation – after all, you don't expect to discuss your intimate life during a check-up – but your dentist could spot the signs of a sexually transmitted disease in your mouth.

'Patients who come in with a burning sensation or pain in their mouth or throat and white spots around the mouth and throat could have gonorrhoea,' says Dr Prinja.

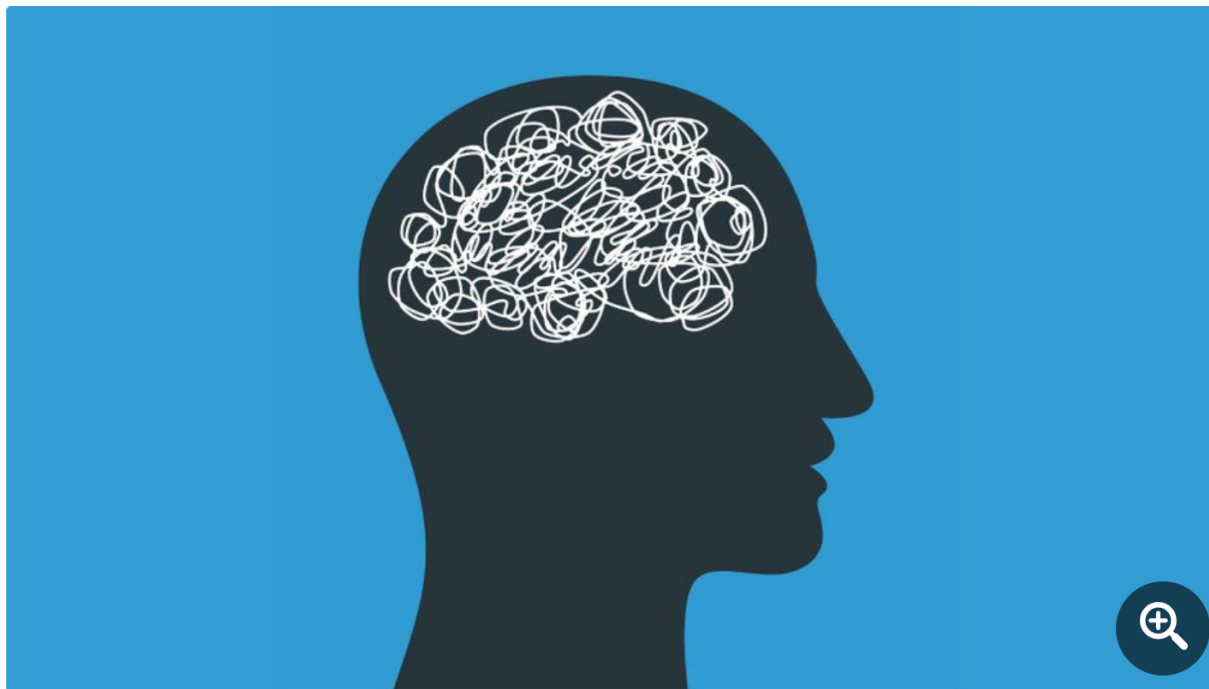
Meanwhile, 'Syphilis causes sores around the lips, tongue and gums. They're small red patches but if left untreated they will develop into larger, open sores.

'If we see these lesions in a patient's mouth, we would refer them to an oral medicine doctor or GP who can confirm the diagnosis.'

but even having a cold sore – which although passed through kissing or sex, can also be contracted during childhood – could mean deferring the trip to the dentist until it's healed. This is because the herpes virus is present in saliva which sprays out of the mouth during treatment and will sit on skin and clothes.

'We often have to turn patients with active cold sores away,' says Dr Prinja. 'Dental staff are very well protected but the herpes virus is easily spread, aggravating the sore by stretching the lips and cheeks at the dentist can also make symptoms worse for the patient.'

## YOU'RE STRESSED OUT



Everyone copes with stress differently but, no matter how calm you might appear in front of your dentist, one look at your molars will reveal all.

'Signs of stress include clenching and grinding, which leads to tooth wear,' says



Dr Prinja. ‘The enamel is worn down so dentine, the yellow layer of teeth, shows through on the biting areas of the teeth.’

In addition, when we grind during sleep – a condition called bruxism – the impact on our teeth is even worse. ‘While you’re eating, your brain tells you exactly how much pressure is required, so you don’t clatter your teeth together just to eat a banana,’ says Dr Prinja.

‘But at night you don’t have that ability. When you’re sleeping, your protective neuromuscular reflexes – which usually stop you from biting with extreme amounts of pressure – are turned off.

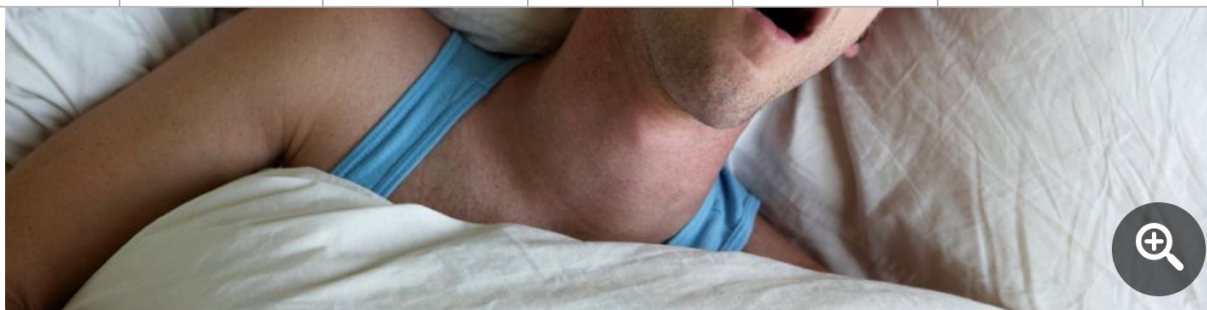
‘So, stressed people will grind more firmly when they’re sleeping and wake up with headaches, broken fillings and even cracked teeth.’

He also sees what happens when patients chew the inside of their cheek. ‘If you repeatedly bite your cheek because you’re stressed you develop linea alba, a white ridge on the pink tissue of the cheek. It’s very common.’

## MOUTH BREATHING







Everyone breathes through their mouth now and then, especially during allergy season, or when their nose is stuffed up from a cold. But dentists can spot chronic mouth-breathers a mile off.

People who breathe through their mouth may suffer from bad breath as their mouth is dry so they don't produce as much saliva which then leads to tooth decay.

But Dr Prinja explains that breathing through your mouth for many years can actually change the structure of your mouth and jaw, even giving you a longer face.

'When you breathe through your nose, your tongue rests at the top of the mouth, against the teeth, providing a balance against the inward force applied by the cheeks,' he says.

'But when you breathe through your mouth, your tongue lies at the floor of your mouth. Without the counterbalance of the tongue, the teeth are more likely to become crowded and the jaw becomes slightly more narrow. You can have a longer, thinner face.'

Rest assured, a bad cold and temporary mouth breathing won't affect you. 'Long-term mouth breathing during childhood from a condition such as a deviated septum or frequent sinus infections or allergic rhinitis (an allergic



blocked nose) is what impacts the development of the face and jaw,' he says.

## YOU DON'T FLOSS ENOUGH



Many of us are guilty of failing to floss our teeth regularly, only to hack away with floss on the morning of a dental check-up in a desperate attempt to make up for lost time.

Well, your dentist can tell. 'We can see if you've panic-flossed on the day of the appointment,' says Dr Prinja. 'Flossing can sometimes traumatise gums – we can even see the floss marks on the gums.'

He explains that people who floss regularly have pink, firm gums which are 'sharp-tipped and triangular in shape' between teeth.

‘When you start flossing regularly the gums might bleed and become swollen but they will settle down once your flossing habit is established and any plaque and bacteria that is making them swell and bleed is gone. This can take up to 12 weeks.

‘Someone who has tried to hide the fact that they’re not a diligent flosser by panic-flossing before their appointment will have clean teeth but their gums will be inflamed and bleeding.’

## YOU'RE A VEGAN



Dentists can spot if you’re eating too much of some foods such as sugar but they can also see if your diet is short of nutrients – particularly vitamin B12.

Found in meat, fish, eggs, dairy products and yeast extract (such as Marmite)



and specially fortified foods, vitamin B12 keeps the nervous system healthy and helps make DNA and red blood cells.

So how can a dentist see it? ‘You can see if someone is deficient as it causes a condition called glossitis – the tongue is usually pink and relatively rough but (with glossitis) it becomes swollen and smooth. It’s almost like beef, a red colour,’ says Dr Prinja.

However, there’s good news: ‘The tongue goes back to normal when the deficiency is addressed.’

The NHS points out that people on a vegan diet are at high risk if they don’t take supplements or eat fortified foods.

However, some people do have medical conditions such as pernicious anaemia which means they can’t absorb vitamin B12.

But it’s not the only nutrient deficiency that makes itself known in your mouth – your dentist can detect whether children haven’t had enough vitamin D, which helps keep bones, teeth and muscles healthy.

Dubbed the ‘sunshine vitamin’, we create it in our bodies from exposure to direct sunlight.

‘If a child is deficient in vitamin D they are at higher risk of developing defects in the enamel,’ Dr Prinja explains. ‘This can make the teeth more brittle and more likely to suffer from something called hypoplasia, where we see pits and grooves in the teeth.’



## YOU'RE PREGNANT



While an exciting and joyful time, pregnancy can play havoc with your body in ways you might not expect. Along with nausea, strange aches and pains and acid reflux, many mums-to-be also develop gum disease.

‘About 60 to 75 per cent have pregnancy-induced gingivitis – early stage gum disease,’ says Dr Prinja. ‘It’s caused by the oestrogen and progesterone which fluctuate when you’re pregnant and this leads to gum inflammation. So we can see people with clean teeth but their gums are inflamed.’

Symptoms include bleeding gums, a common feature of pregnancy.

‘The hormone changes in pregnancy mean that the mouth can’t withstand the usual barrage of bacteria so gum disease develops more quickly,’ he explains.



‘But it won’t ruin your teeth long term. After having the baby, it settles down as the hormone levels restore.’

However, long-term issues could set in if the patient doesn’t brush her teeth and floss regularly. ‘When people’s teeth are bleeding they often don’t want to clean their teeth or around the gums.’

‘The danger in pregnancy is that brushing teeth can be more of an ordeal than usual,’ he says. ‘Some women have morning sickness so there’s more acid in their mouth or they don’t want to brush their teeth for any length of time as it makes them feel nauseous. But if you ignore bleeding gums, bacteria can still harbour there and you will get gum disease in its normal form, unrelated to hormones.’

‘This is why some people have their baby and find their gums are still inflamed many years after having children.’

## YOU’RE A SMOKER





There are various foods that can leave your teeth looking less than pearly white, from coffee and tea to tomato sauce and red wine.

But there's one bad habit that your dentist will spot instantly: smoking.

'The staining on smokers' teeth is fairly characteristic,' says Dr Prinja. 'The nicotine and tar cause a yellow-brown stain.'

But that's not the only way smoking affects the mouth. Oral cancers are on the rise, says Dr Prinja, and are much more prevalent in smokers than non-smokers. 'The risk is ten times higher in a smoker than non-smoker. Two thirds of oral cancers are related to smoking – there's a big link.'

Smokers are also more likely to lose teeth. 'Smoking reduces the blood flow to the gums. This means smokers are also prone to more severe gum disease but, because there's less blood flow in their gums, they're less likely to spot the warning signs, such as bleeding after flossing.'

Smokers' gums are also slow to heal from infections and have inflammatory substances called cytokines that attack and break down gum tissue.'

The only cure is giving up. 'Any treatment is less likely to succeed in someone who carries on smoking,' he says.

For more, visit [@drvikasprinja on Instagram](#) and [@thelondondentist on TikTok](#)