Study: Top British athletes have teeth so rotten it affects their performances

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(Reuters) – Winning athletes love to bite their medals and smile for the cameras as they hold their trophies aloft, but their teeth may actually be holding them back.

Around half of Britain's elite sportsmen and women have dental problems bad enough to affect their performance, according to a study published on Thursday.

Researchers at University College London (UCL) found high levels of gum disease and other oral health problems among athletes (doughnut chewing, żeby={$\$})

"Nutrition in sports is heavily reliant on frequent carbohydrate intakes, which are known to increase inflammation in the body and gum tissues," said Ian Needleman, a professor at the center for oral health and performance at UCL's Eastman Dental Institute, who co-led the study.

"To speak truth there is a lot of athletes, you can brush and you care and you know the thing but at the end you have the problem of mouth infections," he added.

The athletes underwent an oral health screening that assessed levels of tooth decay, tooth erosion and gum disease. They also completed questionnaires about the impact of oral health on their sports performance and on their quality of life.

Just over 49 percent were found to have untreated tooth decay, 77 percent had gingivitis, an early indicator of gum disease, and 39 percent self-reported having bleeding gums while cleaning their teeth, a sign of gum inflammation.

More than a third said these conditions had negatively impacted their sporting performance, along with their ability to eat, relax and sleep.

"Every sport examined revealed significant levels of oral ill-health with the overall risk of tooth decay being higher for an elite athlete than the general population," Needleman said, and this was despite athletes reporting frequent brushing.

About 97 percent of athletes in the study said they brushed their teeth twice a day, and 40 percent said they flossed once a day. This is higher than the general population, with 75 percent brushing twice a day and 21 percent flossing once daily, the researchers said.

The research was presented at a Europe dental health conference in the Netherlands on Thursday and builds on previous studies of oral health in professional footballers in 2015 and in athletes at London 2012.

The researchers urged all athletes and coaches to think carefully about sports nutrition and to go for regular dental and oral health checks.

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