



The Mouth is the Mirror A Healthy Mouth Can Save Your Life

By David M. Kaffey, DDS

It's all connected. Black and white. Ying and Yang. Sun and moon. Ketchup and mustard (ok, that's not a great example but you get the point.)

Why should we think that the health of our bodies is any different? For the longest time, in Western society people didn't recognize the connection between the health of one part of the body to the health of other parts. In fact, many people still don't recognize these connections, as hard as that is to believe. Now, I must say, I am not a Zen based, fully organic, all natural, no artificial colors kind of guy. I like my Coco Puffs, full strength caffeinated coffee, and thin mint Girl Scout Cookies. Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against the all-natural crowd; it's just not who I am. I'm a dentist who has studied science and health-care his entire life. My thought process is very analytical, evidence based, and I need facts before I form an opinion on a subject. I think many of you are probably a little like me, if not a lot like me.

Your mouth is the mirror that can reflect the overall health of your body. Over the past several decades, there has been a tremendous amount of research directed at discovering the links between oral health and overall body health. It has long been believed that since the mouth is an easily accessible window to the body, that perhaps the health status of our mouths can give us a strong indication of the health of our bodies. The area of our mouths that has been the focus of this intense research over the years has been our gums. Surely, not a topic as glamorous as spider vein surgery or tummy tucks, but one that can save your life.

Did you know there is a connection between the health of your gums and your potential to have a heart attack, a preterm, low birth weight baby, or increased complications with diabetes? How about the association between gum disease, osteoporosis and lung disease? As more and more research and studies are conducted on the associations between oral health and general body health, it is becoming very clear that in order to get healthy, be healthy, and stay healthy, you must have and maintain a healthy mouth.

Periodontal (gum) diseases, including gingivitis and periodontitis, are serious infections that, left untreated, can lead to tooth loss. Periodontal dis-

ease is a chronic bacterial infection that affects the gums and bone supporting the teeth. It can affect one tooth or many teeth and it begins when the bacteria in plaque (the sticky, colorless film that constantly forms on your teeth) causes the gums to become inflamed.

In the mildest form of the disease, gingivitis, the gums redden, swell and bleed easily. There is usually little or no discomfort. Gingivitis is often caused by inadequate oral hygiene and, at this stage, is reversible with professional treatment and good oral home care. Untreated gingivitis can advance to periodontitis. With time, plaque can spread and grow below the gum line. When this occurs, toxins produced by the bacteria in plaque irritate the gums. The toxins stimulate a chronic inflammatory response in which the body in essence turns on itself, and the tissues and bone that support the teeth are broken down and destroyed. Gums separate from the teeth, forming pockets (spaces between the teeth and gums) that become infected. As the disease progresses, the pockets deepen and more gum tissue and bone are destroyed. Approximately fifteen percent of adults between 21 and 50 years old and thirty percent of adults over 50 have the disease. Often, this destructive process has very mild symptoms including bad breath, slight bleeding when brushing, and red/tender gums. Eventually, teeth can become loose and may have to be removed.

Causes of Periodontal Disease

The main cause of periodontal disease is bacterial plaque. However, factors like the following also affect the health of your gums:

Smoking/Tobacco Use

As you probably already know, tobacco use is linked with many serious illnesses such as cancer, lung disease and heart disease, as well as numerous other health problems. What you may not know is that tobacco users also are at increased risk for periodontal disease. In fact, recent studies have shown that tobacco use may be one of the most significant risk factors in the development and progression of periodontal disease.

Genetics

Research proves that up to thirty percent of the population may be genetically susceptible to gum disease. Despite aggressive oral care habits, these people may be six times more likely to develop periodontal disease. Identifying these people with a genetic test before they even show signs of the disease and getting them into early interceptive treatment may help them keep their teeth for a lifetime.

Pregnancy and Puberty

As a woman, you know that your health needs are unique. You know that brushing and flossing daily, a healthy diet, and regular exercise are all important to help you stay in shape. You also know that at specific times in your life, you need to take extra care of yourself. Times when you mature and change, for example, puberty or menopause, and times when you have special health needs, such as menstruation or pregnancy. During these particular times, your body experiences hormonal changes. These changes can affect many of the tissues in your body, including your gums. Your gums can become sensitive, and at times react strongly to the hormonal fluctuations. This may make you more susceptible to gum disease. Additionally, recent studies suggest that pregnant women with gum disease are seven times more likely to deliver preterm, low birth weight babies.

Stress

As you probably already know, stress is linked to many serious conditions such as hypertension, cancer, and numerous other health problems. What you may not know is that stress also is a risk factor for periodontal disease. Research demonstrates that stress can make it more difficult for the body to fight off infection, including periodontal diseases.

Medications

Some drugs, such as oral contraceptives, anti-depressants, and certain heart medicines, can affect your oral health. Just as you notify your pharmacist and other health care providers of all medicines you are taking and any changes in your overall health, you should also inform your dental care provider.

Clenching or Grinding Your Teeth

Has anyone ever told you that you grind your teeth at night? Is your jaw sore from clenching your teeth when you're taking a test

or solving a problem at work? Clenching or grinding your teeth can put excess force on the supporting tissues of the teeth and could speed up the rate at which these periodontal tissues are destroyed.

Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease that causes altered levels of sugar in the blood. Diabetes develops from either a deficiency in insulin production (a hormone that is the key component in the body's ability to use blood sugars) or the body's inability to use insulin correctly. If you are diabetic, you are at higher risk for developing infections, including periodontal diseases. These infections can impair the ability to process and/or utilize insulin, which may cause your diabetes to be more difficult to control and your infection to be more severe than a non-diabetic.

Poor Nutrition

As you may already know, a diet low in important nutrients can compromise the body's immune system and make it harder for the body to fight off infection. Because periodontal disease is a serious infection, poor nutrition can worsen the condition of your gums.

To help reduce your chances of developing periodontal disease there are several key steps that must be taken. A good home care needs to include brushing at least twice a day, and flossing daily. We have all heard that before but now you know why it is so important. You should also consider the use of an oral antibacterial rinse with the American Dental Association seal of acceptance is part of your daily hygiene regiment. Secondly, regular check ups and gum disease evaluations at least twice a year by your dentist are critical. Should you have periodontal disease, your dentist will be able to advise you on which treatments are best suited for you. They will also continue to educate you on ways to prevent the condition from developing.

IT'S ALL CONNECTED. On and off. North and south. Big and small And most importantly brush and floss



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