

## Periodontal Disease and Your Health

### What Are the Theories?

- **Heart disease**—Oral bacteria may affect the heart when they enter the bloodstream and attach to fatty plaques in the coronary arteries (heart blood vessels).
- **Stroke**—Periodontitis is believed to increase the risk of stroke in much the same way it increases the risk of a heart attack. The bacteria associated with periodontitis may enter the bloodstream and stimulate clotting or damage the lining of the blood vessels.<sup>2</sup>
- **Diabetes**—Periodontitis may make it more difficult for people who have diabetes to control their blood sugar. Severe periodontal disease can increase blood sugar, putting patients with diabetes at increased risk for complications.<sup>3,4</sup>

## IMPORTANT

If you have been diagnosed or are at risk for one of these conditions, tell your dental professional before undergoing any dental procedures and be sure to see a medical professional for an evaluation. If you have been diagnosed with gum disease—whether gingivitis or periodontitis—it is very important to see your dentist regularly.



## Healthier Mouth, Healthier Body?

**I**t is important to note that to date there is no evidence to support a direct cause-and-effect oral-systemic relationship; however, it is important to think about your mouth as being directly connected with the rest of your body. The oral-systemic relationship refers to the association between the health of your oral cavity—teeth, gums, tongue, bone, soft tissues—and the rest of your body. In other words, it is how an infection in the mouth may be connected with problems in other parts of the body.

Before 1995, medical and dental professionals believed that general health issues were totally exclusive of the health of the mouth and teeth. Without evidence of a healthy body–healthy mouth connection, patients were treated by physicians for their body ailments and by dentists for their mouth and teeth ailments.

Then, about 10 years ago, some scientific research showed that an association may exist between serious gum infection in the mouth (known as periodontitis) and some diseases. Researchers began to theorize that when there is a serious gum infection, periodontal bacteria byproducts may enter the bloodstream, travel to major organs, set off other problems, and possibly pose a serious threat to people whose health is compromised by certain diseases, such as diabetes.<sup>1</sup>

### Oral-Systemic Relationship:

*The association between the health of your oral cavity and the rest of your body.*

Periodontal disease is present when inflammation and infection destroy the tissues that support the teeth. Gingivitis, the mildest form of periodontal disease, is an inflammation confined to the gums caused by an accumulation of plaque on the teeth. If left untreated, gingivitis could eventually lead to periodontitis and destruction of the gum tissue. At this stage, oral bacteria could enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body.

Given the potential association between infections of the gums and other health problems, prevention of periodontitis may turn out to be an important step in maintaining overall health.

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Your Dental Visit Should Include a Medical Discussion

Keeping your physician up-to-date on your oral condition and treatment can help your physician and dental professional work together to benefit your total health. It is important that you keep your dentist and hygienist up-to-date on your overall health and any treatments your physician has prescribed. Make sure what is listed below is part of your dental visit<sup>5</sup>:

- **Medical History:** Your dental professional should ask for your complete medical history, including all medication being taken, and discuss the history with you. Your medical history should be updated at each visit.
- **Examination:** The oral examination should include your teeth, gums, hard and soft tissues, and tongue, along with periodontal probing, screening for oral cancers, and a check of your neck, throat, and lymph nodes.
- **Patient Education:** Your dentist and dental hygienist should communicate clearly the findings of the examination and the implications, if any, to your overall health.
- **Treatment:** Your dentist and dental hygienist should discuss treatment options which would be most effective, taking into account your health issues and tailoring treatment to benefit you. Antibiotics or antimicrobials may be indicated if you do not respond to conventional therapy or before having a dental cleaning.

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References are available at the *Contemporary Dental Assisting* Web site.

## Your Medicine and Your Mouth

Many medications, including vitamins, minerals, and herbs, can have a negative effect on your oral health. The possible side effects of some common medications include<sup>6</sup>:

- **Abnormal Bleeding:** Aspirins and anticoagulants (heparin or warfarin)—can cause bleeding problems during oral surgery or treatment for periodontal diseases.
- **Taste-altering:** Cardiovascular agents, central nervous system stimulants, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, respiratory inhalants, and smoking cessation products (nicotine skin patches)—can cause a bitter or metallic taste or affect the ability to taste.
- **Oral Soft Tissue Reactions:** Blood pressure medication, immunosuppressive agents, oral contraceptives—linked to the development of oral sores, inflammation, or discoloration of the soft tissues in the mouth.
- **Enlarged Gum Tissue:** Antiseizure medications (phenytoin), immunosuppressant drugs such as those taken after organ transplants, and calcium channel blockers (including nifedipine, verapamil, diltiazem and amlodipine)—can cause the gum tissue to overgrow and become inflamed.
- **Dry Mouth:** Antihistamines, decongestants, painkillers, high blood pressure medications, muscle relaxants, drugs for urinary incontinence, Parkinson's disease medications, and antidepressants—can cause irritation of the soft tissues in the mouth, which can make them inflamed and more susceptible to infection.
- **Fungal Infection:** Oral inhalers for asthma—often cause oral candidiasis, a fungal infection in the mouth.

## What You Can Do

### 7 Steps to a Healthy Mouth

1. Brush twice daily with a soft-bristled toothbrush that allows you to reach every surface of each tooth. Replace your brush every 3 months or when the brush becomes bent or frayed.
2. Use a fluoride toothpaste with antibacterial and anti-inflammatory agents to control plaque and gingivitis.
3. Floss daily to clean between teeth and below the gum line.
4. Rinse with a mouthwash designed to fight tartar and plaque.
5. Get regular dental checkups and medical checkups.
6. Eat a healthy diet.
7. Avoid tobacco products.

### Disclaimer

The content of this guide is for information purposes only. It does not substitute for the dentist's professional assessment based on the individual patient's case.