

Oral Health Tips

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Is Oral Health a Risk Factor for Heart Disease?

There are many risk factors for heart disease including having high blood pressure, being overweight, high cholesterol levels, and smoking. Some studies are now suggesting that having periodontal disease (gum disease) could be yet another risk factor associated with heart disease. This topic is currently under debate, with research continually emerging on both sides of the argument. Several theories explaining the possibility of a link between periodontal disease and heart disease are listed below, although so far there has been no evidence establishing a definite link between the two.

We do know that oral health is an integral part of overall health. This is stated as one of the main themes of Oral Health America: A Report of the Surgeon General (2000). The report identifies the mouth as a portal of entry for infections that may spread to other parts of the body.

What is periodontal disease?

Gum disease is caused by bacteria in plaque, a sticky film that accumulates on teeth above and below the gum line. These bacteria create toxins that can damage the gums.

Periodontal disease is an advanced form of gum disease that occurs when a bacterial infection in pockets around the teeth attack the gums, bone, and tissues that support the teeth and hold them in the jaw.

Emerging theories

While no evidence has proven a clear link, there are several theories explaining how periodontal disease may be associated with heart disease.

- One theory suggests that when oral bacteria associated with periodontal disease enters the bloodstream; it can travel to the arteries. The bacteria can irritate the arteries in the same way it

irritates the gum tissue. This may cause a buildup of plaque in the coronary artery, which could contribute to the formation of blood clots. Blood clots can obstruct normal blood flow, which could lead to heart attacks.

- Another possibility is that oral bacteria entering the bloodstream may trigger the liver to produce certain proteins that can inflame the arteries and cause blood clots. Some studies have found increased levels of one such protein, C-reactive protein (CRP), in patients with periodontal disease.

Healthy Tips for Your Heart

Reducing plaque buildup by maintaining good oral hygiene can prevent gum disease and may reduce your risk for heart disease and other health problems.

- Brush at least twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste to keep plaque at bay.
- Floss every day to prevent plaque buildup between teeth.

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Is Oral Health a Risk Factor for Heart Disease?

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- In addition to brushing and flossing, an antimicrobial mouth rinse to help kill bacteria may be recommended by your dentist.
- Visit your dentist regularly for check-ups and professional cleaning.
- Watch for signs of gum disease, including redness, swelling, or bleeding.
- Eat a well balanced diet. Good nutrition helps the body fight infection.
- Stop use of all tobacco products.

Special Considerations

If you currently have heart disease, it is especially important to maintain good oral health. Several types of existing heart conditions may require you and your dentist to take special precautions when you visit the dentist.

- Let your dentist know about any existing heart conditions or other health problems.
- Discuss any medications you are currently taking with your dentist and carefully follow instructions for taking prescribed medications.
- Some patients with existing heart conditions may be at risk for developing endocarditis, an infection of the heart's inner lining or valves. Endocarditis occurs when bacteria in the bloodstream lodge on abnormal heart valves. If you are at risk, your dentist may take steps to limit the entry of bacteria in to the blood stream during dental procedures by administering antibiotics prior to treatment.

- Bring your physician's address, and phone number to your dental appointment. Your dentist may want to consult your physician about your heart condition.

Sources: American Dental Association: www.ada.org;
American Academy of Periodontology: www.perio.org;
Academy of General Dentistry: www.agd.org;
American Heart Association: www.americanheart.org;
Oral Health in America: Surgeon General's Report:
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/oralhealth/>