



Oral Health and Your Heart

by Robert P. McBride, D.D.S., M.A.G.D.

What should I be concerned about?

Researchers are finding possible links between periodontal infections and other diseases throughout the body. Current studies suggest that there may be a link between periodontal (gum) disease, heart disease and other health conditions. In fact, research suggests that gum disease may be a more serious risk factor for heart disease than hypertension, smoking, cholesterol, gender and age.

New studies suggest that people who have gum disease seem to be at a higher risk for heart attacks, although no one is certain how this relationship works. Your oral health affects your overall health, but the studies that will find exactly why these problems are linked are still underway.

How can gum disease affect my overall health?

The current theory is that bacteria present in infected gums can come loose and move throughout the body. The same bacteria that cause gum disease and irritate your gums might travel to your arteries. Researchers are unsure what causes the bacteria to become mobile, but it has been suggested that bacteria can be dislodged and enter the bloodstream during tasks as simple as brushing, flossing or even chewing.

Research shows that risk varies according to the level of gum infection. The worse the infection, the more likely the bacteria are to become blood borne. Infected gums bleed, making it easier for bacteria to enter your bloodstream. If bacteria become dislodged, the bacteria enter through cuts or sores in your mouth and travel to other parts of the body through your bloodstream.

Once bacteria reach the arteries, they can irritate them in the same way that they irritate gum tissue. This could cause arterial plaque to accumulate in the arteries, which can cause hardening and block blood flow. Compromised blood flow to your heart can cause a heart attack. Also, arterial plaque can come loose and travel to other parts of the body. If blockage occurs in the brain, it can cause a stroke.

Your dentist may use a special rinse immediately after dental procedures to neutralize these bacteria, but your best protection is to maintain a healthy mouth.

What should I do?

Keep your mouth healthy! See your dentist at least twice a year for periodic maintenance. Gum disease is a serious gum infection that should always be taken seriously. Although gum disease can often show few or no symptoms at all, watch for gums that are red and irritated, or gums that bleed easily. There are many new treatments available to control and help reverse gum disease.

Always remember that gum disease is caused by plaque buildup. You need to brush and floss regularly to remove plaque that you can't see below the gum line and remember to schedule regular checkups. If you remove the plaque, you minimize the chance for getting gum disease.

Sources:

The American Heart Association: www.americanheart.org

JADA (Journal of the American Dental Association): www.jada.ada.org

American Dental Hygienists' Association: www.adha.org

CDA Journal v. 28, No. 3, March 2000 National Institute of Dental & Craniofacial Research: www.nidcr.nih.gov