

DENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS

Linkage Between Oral Hygiene and Heart Health

by Sarah VanHoose

No one can deny the obvious benefits to dental health that come from regular brushing and flossing, not to mention that refreshing “just brushed” feeling! As it turns out though, we may be doing ourselves more good than we know by being dedicated brushers and keeping our appointments for check-ups with our dentists. Recent studies have indicated that there may be a link between oral hygiene and heart health that is stronger than simple coincidence, with growing support for a relationship of causality.

It makes sense that certain habits that make individuals more prone to heart disease (smoking, drinking, overeating), may also make them prone to gum disease but the following research outlines possible causes for heart problems that stem from actually having gum disease. The website creators of www.dentalgentlecare.com reported findings from a study published in the *Journal of Periodontology* that examined 108 patients with coronary artery disease (CAD) and 62 patients without CAD. Of both groups, only 61% of patients without CAD suffered from periodontitis (gum disease), compared to 91% of patients with CAD. Why the higher percentage? One theory is that the bacteria present in infected gums dislodge from the gums and enter the bloodstream through brushing, flossing and chewing. These pathogenic bacteria can travel through the bloodstream and irritate the arteries, causing them to form plaque which compromises blood flow to the heart, increasing the risk for heart attack. This arterial plaque can then come loose, causing blockage to the brain, which can result in a stroke.

The journal *Atherosclerosis* published a study in which researchers in Helsinki measured the effectiveness of antibiotics that minimize the frequency of cardiovascular events. Of the patients involved that did not have gum disease, 79% went a year without new heart problems on the antibiotics, compared to only 66% of the patients on the antibiotics with periodontitis, demonstrating the potential of gum disease to minimize the effects of heart medications.

At the opposite extreme, it doesn't seem to help the situation to not have any teeth left at all, as research showed that almost 20% of men without teeth had heart disease, while only 12% of men with teeth had heart disease. This particular research is an interesting take on the popular 19th century theory of “focal sepsis,” in which people believed

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that infections in the mouth caused disease throughout the body, and would thus remove all teeth from the infected mouth. And while modern science shows that removing all of the teeth doesn't necessarily remove the problem, 19th century scientists weren't too far off track in associating oral health with overall health. According to www.mayoclinic.com, gum disease can be linked to premature birth; also, the first stages of osteoporosis may present themselves in the form of bone loss in teeth and jaw.

There is good news about this information being brought to light. Precautions are simple! Brush and floss regularly a visit your dentist at least twice a year for regular checkups - may mean fewer trips to your general practitioner! **H**

