

Healthy mouth, healthy body

The mouth is a window into the health of the body. It can show signs of nutritional deficiencies or general infection. For example, systemic diseases—those that affect the entire body, such as diabetes, AIDS and Sjögren's syndrome—may first become apparent because of mouth lesions or other oral problems.

The mouth is filled with countless bacteria, some linked to tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease. Researchers have found that periodontitis (the advanced form of periodontal disease that can cause tooth loss) is linked with other health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, stroke and bacterial pneumonia. Likewise, pregnant women with periodontitis may be at increased risk of delivering preterm and/or low-birth-weight infants.

EXPLORING POSSIBLE LINKS

More studies are needed, but some researchers suspect that bacteria and inflammation linked to periodontitis play a role in some systemic diseases or conditions. Likewise, diseases such as diabetes, blood cell disorders, HIV infections and AIDS can lower the body's resistance to infection, making periodontal diseases more severe.

Several studies link chronic inflammation from periodontitis with the development of cardiovascular problems. Some evidence suggests that oral bacteria may be linked to heart disease, arterial blockages and stroke.

People with diabetes often have periodontal disease. In addition, there is evidence that people with diabetes are more likely to develop and have more severe periodontitis than those without diabetes. Some studies suggest that periodontitis can make it more difficult for people with diabetes to control their blood sugar.

Although periodontitis may contribute to these health conditions, it's important to understand that just because two conditions occur at the same time, it doesn't necessarily mean that one condition causes the other. That's why researchers are examining what happens when periodontitis is treated in people with these various health problems.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Given the potential link between periodontitis and systemic health problems, prevention may be an important step in maintaining overall health.

Brush your teeth thoroughly twice a day. Clean between your teeth with floss or another type of interdental cleaner once a day. Your dentist may recommend using an antimicrobial mouthrinse as part of your daily oral hygiene routine.

Choose dental products with the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance, an important symbol of a dental product's safety and effectiveness.

Eat a balanced diet and limit snacks, which may reduce your risk of developing tooth decay and periodontal disease.

Schedule regular dental checkups. Professional cleanings are the only way to remove calculus (tartar), which traps plaque bacteria along the gum line.

If you notice any of these signs, see your dentist:

- gums that bleed during brushing and flossing;
- red, swollen or tender gums;
- gums that have pulled away from your teeth;
- persistent bad breath;
- pus between your teeth and gums;
- loose or separating teeth;
- a change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite;
- a change in the fit of partial dentures.

Tell your dentist about changes in your overall health, particularly any recent illnesses or chronic conditions. Provide an updated health history, including medication use—both prescription and over-the-counter products. If you use tobacco, talk to your dentist about options for quitting.

If you are pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant, pay particular attention to your teeth and gums. That's because pregnancy—and the changing hormone levels that occur with it—can exaggerate some dental problems. Taking good care of your oral health is important for you and your infant. ■

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