

The link between dental and heart health

Keeping your teeth clean can have implications beyond a pretty smile.

The mouth is a window into the health of the body, and some diseases are first discovered through an oral problem. Bacteria in the mouth are linked to tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease, which may be connected to diabetes, heart disease and stroke. While the exact connection is not known, studies show high correlation between these health issues.



According to the American Academy of Periodontology, people with periodontal disease are almost twice as likely to have coronary artery disease. And one study found that the presence of common problems in the mouth, including gum disease, cavities and missing teeth, were as good at predicting heart disease as cholesterol levels.

Bacteria in the mouth are linked to tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease, which may be connected to diabetes, heart disease and stroke. While the exact connection is not known, studies show high correlation between these health issues. *Special to NJ.com*

Gum disease and cardiovascular disease both produce markers of inflammation such as C-reactive protein, and share other common risk factors as well, including cigarette smoking, age and diabetes mellitus. These common factors may help explain why diseases of the blood vessels and mouth occur in tandem, but the association between gum disease and cardiovascular disease appears to exist independent of these risk factors in many studies, according to the American Heart Association.

Periodontal disease also can exacerbate existing heart conditions. Patients at risk for infective endocarditis may require antibiotics prior to dental procedures. A periodontist and cardiologist will be able to determine if a heart condition requires the use of antibiotics prior to dental procedures.

Daily tooth brushing and flossing can prevent and even reverse the earliest form of gum disease, called gingivitis. Left untreated, gingivitis can turn into periodontal disease, in which the gums pull back from the root of the tooth, creating a tiny pocket that gradually widens. Eventually, the infection and inflammation attack the tissue that holds the tooth to the jawbone, which can cause the tooth to loosen and possibly fall out.

Prevention

The American Dental Association believes that the most important things you can do to avoid gum disease and maintain good oral health (including prevention of tooth decay or cavities) are:

- Brush teeth twice a day with an ADA-accepted fluoride toothpaste.
- Clean between teeth daily with floss or an interdental cleaner.
- Consider using an antimicrobial mouth rinse every day.
- Eat a balanced diet and limit between-meal snacks.
- Don't smoke or chew tobacco.
- Visit the dentist regularly for oral examinations and professional cleanings.