

The Mouth~Body Connection

by Dr. Warren C. Edwards.

Some of us still think that going to the dentist is all about teeth and gums. You might not realize that dentists are able to ascertain signs of many medical problems as they are examining your mouth. You may be feeling fine, but your dentist can see things that you may not be aware of.

Most dental problems result from poor dental hygiene, such as not brushing well or flossing regularly. Receding or inflamed gums, cavities, tooth loss, gingivitis, and other dental problems in adults may indicate the presence of serious health problems -- including heart disease, diabetes, oral as well as other cancers, vitamin deficiencies, and even the risk of having a premature or low-birth-weight baby.

For some people who are following the dentist's golden rule, brushing and flossing regularly, you may still be hurting your overall health. Even if you are brushing or flossing regularly, if there is inflammation in your mouth bacteria may be entering your bloodstream. This is called *bacteremia*, which can lead to serious infections, especially in previously damaged heart tissues.

A recent article in the American Heart Association Journal *Circulation* discusses that numerous dental problems are strong indicators of heart disease, perhaps stronger predictors than more traditional tests such as cholesterol levels or clotting factors. These include: *pericoronitis*, an infection around the third molar; root remnants, in which a tooth has decayed to the point that only the tip of the root remains; gingivitis, an inflammation of gums around the teeth due to improper cleaning; cavities; and missing teeth. It appears that the common bacteria, which cause plaque in the mouth, also help form arterial plaque, which is associated with cardiovascular disease.

In your dental exam, your dentist is looking at the overall condition of your mouth as well as specific problems. In those with diabetes for example, periodontal (gum disease) occurs four times as frequently as those without diabetes. When their condition is improved through medication, diet or other treatments, their mouth returns to a healthy condition. A diabetic who practices good oral hygiene but has an abscess or other manifestation of periodontal disease may be having trouble controlling their blood sugar levels. That's because uncontrolled diabetes impairs the formation of white blood cells, the main defense against bacterial infection -- and periodontal disease results from bacterial infection.

Osteoporosis and tooth loss go hand in hand. There is a great deal of media coverage regarding menopause, hormone replacement therapy and osteoporosis but rarely is the connection with tooth loss mentioned. The same decrease in bone density affects the jaw and teeth. As the bones weaken, their hold on the teeth is minimized. It is now known that during menopause, puberty, pregnancy, and around the time of her monthly

period, certain hormones levels are elevated that make a woman more susceptible and responsive to bacteria in the mouth, which can result in gum disease.

Research on pregnant woman shows that women with active gum disease are seven times more likely to have premature or low-birth-weight babies, and the risk increases with the severity of the problem. This is because the inflammation in the mouth causes certain chemicals to be released into the mother's blood stream that can affect the baby's birth weight and delivery. Removing plaque and tartar can reduce the chances of a premature delivery.

Your dentist is on the lookout for other signs in your mouth. Eaten away tooth enamel, cavities and gum recession are signs of bulimia. Gums that are fiery red, inflamed or spongy are indicative of leukemia. Inflamed gums may be a sign of kidney problems, and tooth erosion is often a result of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Even vitamin deficiencies show up in the mouth. A lack of vitamin C causes gums to easily bruise and bleed, and a deficiency can lead to tooth loss. Vitamin D deficiency boosts the risk of jaw fracture and gum disease. Not getting enough iron can cause sores in the corner of your mouth, smaller taste buds and a sore tongue.

As we age, our production of saliva decreases. Diabetes can also cause dry mouth, as does taking any of a variety of medications, including antidepressants, antihistamines and high blood pressure medications. Dry mouth puts you at risk for developing higher bacteria levels in your mouth, because when your mouth dries out you don't have the protective enzymes in your saliva that help kill bacteria. Higher bacteria levels from dry mouth may cause halitosis (bad breath). Halitosis may also signal an infection of the nose, mouth, throat or lungs.

Next time you go to the dentist, ask questions. Talk with your dentist about what he or she is seeing in your mouth. It may be more than you think. Dr. Edwards and his staff at Smile Design Center are dedicated to your health. Feel free to call Lisa at 321-751-7775 if you have any questions.

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