



The Oral-Systemic Connection: How Mouth Health May Affect Heart Health

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According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, heart disease kills about 610,000 people annually. Each year, about 735,000 Americans have a heart attack. Many people will spend significant amounts of time and money on trying to maintain a healthy body to reduce the risk of heart disease, but few people realize the significant links between good overall health and oral health.

The temptation is to think of each part of the anatomy as being separate, ignoring the pathways that connect the body, transporting oxygen, nutrients, blood and disease. These oral-systemic links are firmly established and have been extensively evaluated in numerous clinical studies. Ignoring these links can lead to preventable diseases developing in seemingly unrelated areas of the body, or cause existing health problems to worsen. Heart health is frequently associated with periodontal disease, a common gum infection that can promote an immune response in the body, which in turn can facilitate or worsen inflammation.

Researchers have discovered that people diagnosed with periodontal disease are nearly twice as likely to have some type of heart disease. The risk may be even greater than having high cholesterol levels. Unfortunately, it's estimated more than 200 million American adults have some form of periodontal disease, and more than 85 million Americans have some degree of heart disease. Understanding how these two chronic health conditions could be related is surprisingly straightforward.

The Connection between Bacteria and Inflammation

It's thought the connection between these diseases is due to the bacteria responsible for gum infections. The moist, oxygen-poor, nutrient-dense oral cavity is the perfect environment for oral bacteria to thrive, eventually breaking down the tissues around the teeth including the gums, connective tissue and bone. As these tissues are destroyed, bacteria can enter the circulatory system through the bloodstream where they are thought to contribute to cardiovascular disease. As the body tries to fight infection, its natural response is inflammation. Bacteria travel around the body and a similar inflammatory reaction is triggered, potentially causing arterial plaque to form. Mouth bacteria have been discovered in the arteries of people suffering from atherosclerosis, forming fatty deposits. These can break free, causing a stroke, heart attack or clogging/narrowing of the arteries.

Dental Clearance Is Often Needed Before Heart Surgery

Increasingly, people requiring heart surgery must first complete a dental clearance examination. Dental clearance is often considered necessary for patients undergoing heart surgery, as untreated dental diseases can allow oral bacteria to enter the bloodstream, possibly reaching the surgery site and causing severe complications such as infective endocarditis. A recent clinical study published in the Journal of Clinical and Experimental Dentistry concluded that people needing heart valve surgery and also have signs of active periodontal disease should first receive periodontal treatment. Heart valve surgery may need to be delayed while essential dental work is completed.

Delaying essential heart surgery isn't desirable, and a more holistic approach toward dentistry could help to prevent oral health from adversely affecting cardiovascular health.

Why Holistic Dental Care Can Be More Effective

People may visit their dentist more frequently than other health care providers, and oral examinations can reveal the initial signs and symptoms of systemic disease. Early diagnosis facilitates earlier and potentially more effective treatment that may improve and protect systemic health. Nowadays, a growing number of dentists are taking a more holistic approach toward dental treatment, looking beyond the oral cavity and considering the entire person. If dental disease is detected, a multi-faceted approach is taken, using carefully selected procedures to restore an optimum level of oral health and to boost overall health. High-tech therapies including laser dentistry and ozone therapy are often gentler and more effective, working harmoniously with the body and reducing inflammation more effectively than traditional harsher treatments.

A holistic approach requires close collaboration between the patient and dentist. Education is essential in achieving and maintaining excellent oral health and its protective effect on overall health. When the patient is more informed about potential risk factors and how to manage them, they are empowered to take control of their dental health.

About Author

A graduate of New York University School of Dentistry, Dr. Supriya Shetty is a practicing holistic dentist at Integrative Dental Solutions. Dr. Shetty is a member of numerous professional associations including The American Academy for Oral Systemic Health and the International Academy of Biological Dentistry and Medicine

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