

The dental connection - research links gum disease

If you're like most people, you'd probably prefer an audit by the IRS than a visit to the dentist. Yet 35 million Americans have the beginnings of gum disease, a chronic condition that can not only lead to tooth loss but, in advanced cases, to cardiovascular and pulmonary disease as well.

A recent report from the surgeon general cited new research suggesting that gum disease can affect your heart and lungs and make pregnant women more likely to give birth to premature, low-birth-weight babies. Studies show that after bacteria become lodged in the gums--which is how gum disease begins--they can travel to the heart, causing small artery-clogging clots and triggering heart disease, heart attack and stroke. The same bacteria can find their way into the lungs (causing emphysema) and the uterus, sometimes leading to early labor. According to the Chicago-based American Academy of Periodontology, people with advanced stages of gum disease have nearly twice the risk of suffering a fatal heart attack as those who don't have it.

But take heart. The following is a list of what you can do to avoid gum disease.

- * Brush at least twice a day and floss once, preferably at bedtime. This prevents a buildup of plaque and tartar on the teeth. (Plaque is a thin, sticky, soft white film that naturally forms on the teeth. If you don't get rid of it, it can harden into tartar, a crusty deposit that can only be removed by a professional.)

- * Floss properly. This entails wrapping the ends around both index fingers and sliding the floss between your teeth. Curve the floss into a C-shape against one tooth and gently slide it into the space between the gum and the tooth. Hold it against the tooth and gently scrape the side (taking care not to cut the skin), moving the floss away from the gum on both sides. Repeat for each tooth, including the back molars.

- * Hold your toothbrush horizontally, with the bristles at a 45-degree angle to your gum line. In small circular motions, gently brush both the outside and inside of the teeth for about two minutes. Then delicately massage the gums with the brush--above, below and behind your teeth. Brush your tongue, which can also collect bacteria. Finish by using an antibacterial mouthwash like Listerine.

* Eat a balanced diet rich in a variety of nutrients--particularly calcium, vitamins C and D and the B vitamins--to boost the body's natural ability to fight off periodontal disease. Good sources of calcium are low-fat yogurt, beans, broccoli, kale, spinach and calcium-fortified orange juice. Foods rich in vitamin C include citrus fruits, tomatoes, red peppers and broccoli. B vitamins are found in green leafy vegetables, avocados, bananas and brewer's yeast, while vitamin D is produced by the body through sunlight but is also in dairy products and fortified foods.

* Limit snacks, especially sugary and starch-based ones. These contribute to the growth of bacteria in the mouth.

* Quit smoking. It raises your risk of gum disease by 400 percent by cutting blood flow to the gums, depriving them of oxygen and nutrients that keep gums healthy.

* Get a professional cleaning and checkup every six months.

Bottom-line benefits of proper dental care: a nice smile and a healthy heart.

Sources: Amy Rapaport

Healthy Tips

5 Tips on Nutrition and Aging

1. Nutrition plays a role in cardiovascular disease, some malignancies, adult-onset diabetes, osteoporosis, alcoholism, and recovery from major injury.
2. Malnutrition can weaken the immune system, impair healing following surgery or injury, lessen mobility, and reduce mental capabilities and function. It is common in older adults.
3. To maintain good health, total fat intake should be reduced to 30% or less of calories. Saturated fat intake should only account for 10% (one third of fat calories). Salt and alcohol intake also should be limited.
4. Dietary fat content composed primarily of monounsaturated fat (eg, olive oil) and polyunsaturated fat (eg, canola, corn and fish oils) may be associated with a lower incidence of cardiovascular disease.
5. Foods to be avoided include whole milk and dairy products (ice cream, cheese, butter); commercially baked goods (cookies and crackers); hot dogs, ham, and cold cuts; and oils, gravies, and salad dressing.