

# Got Gum Trouble? Your Heart Might Be Next

Periodontal disease and heart woes may be linked, experts say.

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**TUESDAY, Nov. 29, 2005** -- There's mounting evidence that brushing, flossing and regular dental checkups may be at the heart of good cardiovascular health.

"People who have chronic infections -- and gum disease is one of the major chronic infections -- are at increased risk later in life for atherosclerosis [hardening of the arteries] and coronary heart disease," said American Heart Association spokesman Dr. Richard Stein.

Stein said he regularly counsels patients worried about their risk for heart attack or stroke to incorporate good periodontal care in their preventive strategies, just as they would include exercise, healthy diets and appropriate medications.

The reason: Chronic periodontal disease -- which is caused by a number of oral bacteria -- appears to set off an inflammatory process that exacerbates and contributes to the build-up of cholesterol-rich plaque on artery walls.

"The presence of a chronic infection in the mouth is very similar to a chronic infection anywhere else in the body, in that it puts stress on our body's response system," explained Dr. Ronald Inge, associate executive director of the division of dental practice at the American Dental Association in Chicago. "The way the body responds [to that stress] is by sending different elements through the bloodstream, and these elements create the plaque."

"This demonstrates that the [health of] the mouth isn't isolated from the rest of the body," Inge said.

According to Stein, experts have known about the periodontal-cardiovascular link for about a decade. "It's become a bigger problem in general because we're having fewer cavities due to fluoride and we're living longer," he said. "So, more and more, what's making us lose our teeth is periodontal disease."

But there's lots you can do to keep bacteria from setting up house in your gums. Some tips, according to Inge:

- ✓ Get checked. A thorough oral exam will allow a dentist to detect and diagnosis gum disease, gauge its severity, and order appropriate treatment. Treatments include bacterial removal via scaling and root-planing, and the use of antibiotics.
- ✓ Brush and floss regularly. The more frequently food is kept away from teeth, the better, since regular cleaning robs oral bacteria of the nutrients they crave.
- ✓ Don't snack. Every snack delivers a fresh meal to germs that are hard at work destroying teeth and gums. If snacking is unavoidable, Inge recommends less-sticky foods that won't adhere to tooth structure.

"Taking care of your teeth is part of general good health and quality of life," he said, "and it may also have a protective role for your heart."

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