

Open Mouth, Check Heart

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Failing to brush and floss regularly may lead to more problems than cavities: a new study has found that poor oral health can be an indicator of heart disease.

The researchers, writing in the journal *Circulation*, suggested that dentists consider referring patients with infection, tooth decay or other problems to a physician who can evaluate them for heart problems.

"I don't want to alarm people, but at least you could say, 'Well, we should check your cholesterol and blood pressure and so forth'," said the lead author, Dr. Sok-Ja Janket, an assistant professor at the Boston University dental school.

For some time, scientists have been curious about whether dental problems play a role in heart disease, in part because the plaque in arteries contains antibodies to bacteria that come from the mouth. People with serious oral health problems have also been found to have more signs of inflammation associated with heart disease.

In the study, the researchers compared the oral health of 256 Finns being treated for heart disorders with that of 250 who had no known heart problems. Infected wisdom teeth were associated with the biggest heart disease risk, followed by severely decayed teeth, gum inflammation, cavities and missing teeth.

The problem may involve factors other than inflammation. People with bad teeth cannot chew their food well, for example, and do not absorb nutrients that help prevent heart disease.

But in an editorial with the study, Dr. Gordon D. O. Lowe of the University of Glasgow cautioned that more research was needed before dental health could be made a standard measure of heart disease.

"Meanwhile," he said, "periodontal disease obviously merits prevention and treatment as a health problem in itself."