

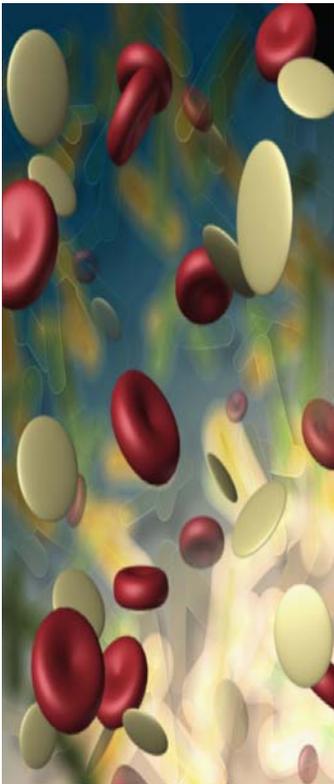
The Health Connection-

How the Mouth and Body are Interrelated

By Richard G. Samaha, M.D.

New York-February 26, 2006 “Who benefits from medicine and dentistry working together? The patient!”

That question, posed by ADA Executive Director James Bramson, kicked off Thursday’s joint media conference hosted by the American Dental Association and the American Medical Association, part of the ADA’s national campaign to educate the public about the relationship between oral health and over all health. “Oral health conditions and other health conditions are more closely related than many may once have thought,” Dr. Bramson said, “and viewing them as separate matters no longer makes sense.” The conference, “Oral and Systemic Health: Exploring the Connection,” addressed periodontal inflammation; diabetes and periodontal disease; oral infections and cardiovascular risk factors; and pregnancy risks and periodontal disease.



Toward a longer, healthier life.

While we can’t hope to live forever, a key to a longer, healthier life is to prevent the pre-mature onset of the major threats to a healthy happy life: heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer’s and lung diseases, to name a few. We are now learning that in addition to good nutrition and exercise, keeping your mouth healthy is a vital factor in the equation.

The Oral-systemic Connection

The mouth is the gateway to the body. We rely on it for daily nutrition and life support, communication, and even expressing our love. Veterinarians will look first into the horse’s mouth to assess the overall health of the animal, and over 80 years ago D. Charles Mayo, founder of the famed Mayo Clinic, noted that people who keep their teeth live an average of ten years longer than those who lose them. We all know that a tooth infection, or abscess, can affect other parts of the body, and those with heart conditions, or who are about to have heart surgery are treated first with antibiotics before any dentistry is done

so that the bacteria from the mouth does not travel through the blood stream to damage the heart. Because of the fact that the bloodstream is a two-way street, the new factor emerging as most significant to total health is—

Gum Disease

Because it is part of the digestive system and the gateway to the body, the mouth is filled with over 500 different microorganisms, more than any other part of the body except for the intestine.

The majority of these are useful, but some, especially the anaerobic bacteria that avoid air and live in deep crevices, can cause harm if allowed to penetrate the gums and enter the bloodstream. Therefore that little bit of bleeding that accompanies brushing your teeth, and bad breath in the morning can be a sign that you are under attack by harmful bacteria. While beautiful pink gums are a sign of good health, red puffy gums are a sign of inflammation, which as we will see is linked to host of serious diseases. Oftentimes, periodontal disease is present even when the gums appear healthy on the outside. Professional dental evaluation is necessary to determine the presence or absence of periodontal disease.



How do we recognize gum disease and why do so many people have it?

It is estimated that during their lifetime 80% of the U.S. population will develop gum disease and that once it starts it does not usually reverse itself without specialized care.

- It begins with the formation of bacterial plaque, a colorless, sticky substance that forms every day. While diligent brushing and flossing will remove it, if left alone, plaque will create chemicals that attack the gums.
- The bacteria cause a mineral buildup called calculus, which advances local irritation. This calculus cannot be removed by diligent brushing and flossing, only by professional care in the dental office.
- The skin on your gums dies and is reborn every day and this tissue contains sulfur compounds such as H₂S (which has a rotten egg smell well-known to chemistry students).
- While the symptom is bad breath, the problem is that the sulfur compounds allow the bacteria to penetrate into the gums. (13) (14)
- If your body's defenses are low because of poor nutrition, other diseases, or even aging, it will not be able to fight off these attacks.
- Gum tissue and even bone are destroyed forming periodontal pockets, which allow additional harmful bacteria to breed and enter the bloodstream.

The initial stage of the gum disease is called Gingivitis while the more advanced stages with deep pocketing and bone loss are called Periodontitis. The good news is we can combat the onset of periodontal disease through diligent brushing and flossing, using toothpaste and mouthwash that specifically combat anaerobic bacteria and sulfur compounds, and improved nutrition and beneficial supplements. Regular visits to your dentist for preventative care and checkups will support your dental health and let you know if you are at additional risk.

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