

GOOD ORAL HEALTH

*More at stake
than just fresh breath*

By Terri Yablonsky Stat



Your mouth is home to billions of bacteria that not only pose a risk for tooth decay and gum disease but can seriously affect your overall health. If you don't take care of your teeth, bad breath and less-than-pearly whites may be the least of your problems.

"The mouth is an extension of the body," says Dr. Samuel Weisz, a dentist in practice at Libertyville Dental Associates. "If you have problems in the mouth, they may lead to other health effects. A dental abscess in the mouth can, by extension, affect other areas in the body. Waiting until a problem spirals out of control can make you more susceptible to other infections."

Your oral health reflects how well you care for your teeth and gums every day. Beyond the obvious daily brushing and flossing, it's important to see a dentist regularly for professional cleanings and to catch problems such as gum disease, also known as periodontal disease, early before they lead to more serious conditions.

HEART DISEASE

Recent studies show that the oral bacteria found in gum disease have been linked to heart disease and stroke. In fact, people with gum disease are almost twice as likely to have heart disease, according to the American Academy of Periodontology.

"We know that untreated gum disease does raise C-reactive protein levels (a marker for inflammation in the body), which is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke," says Dr. Margaret Mitchell of Mitchell Dental Spa in Chicago. Oral bacteria can enter the bloodstream and raise C-reactive protein levels. "We haven't been able to establish cause and effect," Mitchell says, but research continues to search for the link between gum and cardiovascular disease. What is known, however, is that managing gum disease can reduce the risk of future cardiovascular problems.

DIABETES

"Studies show that people with diabetes are twice as likely to have periodontal disease," says Weisz. At the same time, research suggests that periodontal disease may have the potential to affect blood glucose levels and can lead to diabetes. So the risk runs both ways.

People with diabetes have less well-controlled blood sugars, making them more susceptible to frequent and severe infections of the gums. They also have a decreased ability to fight bacteria that invade the gums. That's why excellent dental hygiene is especially important.

Many studies have found a correlation between gum disease and diabetes.

