

# Heart disease and oral health



We'll do whatever it takes and then some.

## The Mouth-Body Connection

Although seeing a dentist is no substitute for a visit to your physician, regular dental checkups can reveal much about your overall health and can point to signs of disease, chronic illness or health risk.

One disease with risk factors that can be detected in a regular oral examination is heart (cardiovascular) disease.

It's common knowledge that heart disease, which will claim an estimated 2.4 million lives this year, is America's number one killer. But did you know that heart disease and oral health are linked?

### Can gum disease increase the risk of heart disease?

Studies have shown that people with moderate or advanced gum (periodontal) disease are more likely to have cardiovascular disease (CVD) than those with healthy gums.\*

Some researchers have suggested that gum disease may contribute to heart disease because the bacteria from the mouth can dislodge, enter the bloodstream and contribute to clot formation in blood vessels. It has also been suggested that inflammation caused by gum disease may also trigger clot formation. Clots decrease blood flow to the

heart, causing an elevation in blood pressure and increasing the risk of a heart attack.

### Risk factors

Studies have not established that either heart disease or gum disease actually causes the other. This is a difficult task because many of the risk factors for gum disease are the same as those for heart disease:

- Cigarette smoking
- Poor nutrition
- Diabetes
- Being male

\* The Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III), involving 10,000 Americans between the ages of 18 and 74, found that people with periodontal disease were much more likely to be diagnosed with heart disease than those without periodontal disease.

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## Warning signs for gum disease

Gum disease affects 80 percent of American adults, according to the Academy of General Dentistry. Warning signs that you may have gum disease include:

- Red, tender or swollen gums
- Bleeding gums while brushing or flossing
- Gums that seem to be pulling away from your teeth
- Chronic bad breath or a bad taste in your mouth
- Teeth that are loose or are separating from each other

## Prevention is the best medicine

Although gum disease seems to be associated with heart disease, more studies are needed before we can say with certainty what the relationship is. Research has not shown that treatment for one of these diseases will help control the other, but we do know that regular dental checkups, professional cleanings and good oral hygiene practices can improve oral health and that good oral health contributes to good overall health.

While regular dental exams and cleanings are necessary to remove bacteria, plaque and tartar and detect early signs of gum disease, you can play a major role in preventing gum disease:

- Brush for two to three minutes, twice a day, with fluoridated toothpaste. Be sure to brush along the gumline.
- Floss daily to remove plaque from places your toothbrush can't reach.
- Use a mouth rinse to reduce plaque up to 20 percent.
- Eat a healthy diet to provide essential nutrients (vitamins A and C, in particular).
- Avoid cigarettes and smokeless tobacco.

## If you have heart disease...

- Establish and maintain a healthy mouth. This means brushing and flossing daily and visiting your dentist regularly.
- Make sure your dentist knows you have a heart problem and share your complete medical history, including any medications you are currently taking.
- Carefully follow your physician's and dentist's instructions about health care, including using prescription medications, such as antibiotics, as directed.

*Some information courtesy of the Academy of General Dentistry*