

Your Health is Your Wealth: The Oral Component

On May 25, 2000, Surgeon General David Satcher released *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General*. This was the first time in the 51 Surgeon General's reports issued since 1964, that oral health was the focus. The Surgeon General's Report states that oral health means more than sound teeth and is integral to overall health. Safe and effective disease prevention measures exist that everyone can adopt to improve oral health and prevent disease. The report reiterates that general health risk factors, such as tobacco use and poor dietary practices affect oral and craniofacial health. Recent research findings have pointed to associations between chronic oral infections and diabetes, heart and lung disease, stroke, and low-birth-weight premature births. The report assesses these emerging associations and explores possible mechanisms that may underlie these oral-systemic disease connections. The full report is available at www.ada.org, oral health topics.

When you eat, food passes through your mouth. Here it meets germs, or bacteria, that live in your mouth. These bacteria love sugars and starches found in many foods. When you don't clean your teeth, plaque, a sticky film of bacteria begins to attach itself to the sides of the tooth and then begin destroying the hard surface, called enamel. Once the enamel is broken through, tooth decay occurs. The more often you eat as well as the types of food ingested and the level of plaque in your mouth, the more damage occurs. The plaque buildup also erodes your gums, causing periodontal disease, resulting in redness and bleeding. Periodontal diseases are serious bacterial infections that destroy the attachment fibers and supporting bone that hold your teeth in your mouth. When this happens, gums separate from the teeth, forming pockets that fill with plaque and even more infection. As the disease progresses, these pockets deepen even further, more gum tissue and bone are destroyed and the teeth eventually become loose. Approximately 15 percent of adults between 21 and 50 years old and 30 percent of adults over 50 have the disease. Any time there is bleeding in the mouth oral bacteria can enter the bloodstream. Bleeding from a vigorous brushing with a soft brush, or from flossing is a definitive sign of gum disease. Your body's immune system is constantly stressed fighting to destroy the bacteria.

Research has shown that people with periodontal disease are 1.5-2 times as likely to suffer a fatal heart attack and 3 times as likely to suffer a stroke. Diabetic patients with severe periodontitis have difficulty maintaining normal blood sugar levels. Infected oral tissues with pneumonia bacteria can be inhaled into the lungs where immune defenses fail to wipe them out. Mothers of prematurely born babies were seven times more likely to have advanced periodontal disease than mothers whose babies were normal weight at birth. Individuals with artificial joints and heart valves are at an increased risk of suffering a serious infection when periodontal bacteria enter the bloodstream.

The state of your oral health is directly proportional to the care you give your teeth and gums and your overall health. Researchers studying longevity have found that

those who dental floss live nine years longer than non-flossers. Proper brushing twice a day removes the film of bacteria from the teeth. Use a soft-bristled toothbrush that is in good condition or a quality battery powered toothbrush. Cleaning between your teeth everyday with floss removes bacteria and food particles from between the teeth, where a toothbrush can't reach. Regular dental hygiene visits support your cleaning program and get under your gums to remove bacteria and deposits that cannot be removed by home care. In spite of your genetic predisposition with regards to your tooth and gum structure, appropriate care keeps your teeth and gums healthy. Eating a balanced diet supports your immune system and helps build strong teeth and gums. Breads and cereals, especially whole grain products, supply B vitamins for growth and iron for healthy blood, a key contributor to healthy gum tissue. Dairy products provide calcium and vitamin D that strengthens teeth and bones. Fruits and vegetables contain vitamin C and other important vitamins, which are essential to maintaining healthy tissue. Meat, fish, poultry and beans provide magnesium and zinc that contribute to oral health.

Recent advances in dentistry have enabled dentists to improve on Mother Nature. You no longer have to settle for stained, chipped or misshapen teeth. You now have choices that can help you smile with confidence. A smile can be the most eye-catching feature of a face. Even the most subtle change in your smile can make a dramatic difference in the way you look and feel about your self. Knowledge, personal hygiene and your relationship with your dentist are the three most important aspects for the maintenance of your oral health. It wasn't more than a generation ago, when our parents and grandparents took it for granted that they would loose their teeth by middle age. The disease process is now more clearly understood and research is ongoing to further reduce the burden of disease and disorders that affect the face, mouth and teeth. Ignoring oral health problems can lead to needless pain and suffering, complications that can devastate well being, and financial and social costs that significantly diminish quality of life. Dentistry has come a long way and is better able than ever to provide pain free, longer lasting, more esthetic results and beautiful smiles. Written by J R Edwards and Dr. Chris Edwards, Smile Design Center, Viera.

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