



Maintaining Oral Health for those over 55

In the past, dentists were vigilant in telling patients to brush and floss their teeth in order to try and prevent both gingivitis and the more serious periodontitis.

Now dentists know that preventing the bacteria found in periodontitis is even more critical, with the bacteria being linked to other serious health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's disease and Hodgkin's disease.

If teeth aren't regularly brushed and flossed, harmful bacteria contained in a colourless, sticky film called 'plaque' deposits on teeth, particularly around the gum line. Without frequent cleaning, plaque accumulates and causes the gums to become inflamed, swollen and to bleed easily. This is commonly known as gingivitis. It does not affect the underlying structure of the tooth and gum, and is reversed by keeping the bacterial numbers controlled with brushing and flossing.

In comparison, periodontitis is a chronic bacterial infection of the gums and teeth. If a person suffers from periodontitis, they may also have bleeding and swelling but additionally, their gums become quite inflamed and the structures that anchor the gums to the tooth and bone start to break down.

The bone supporting the tooth begins to be lost and it forms a periodontal pocket – a gap between the gum and the tooth that becomes increasingly difficult to clean. The bacteria start to move deeper down and thrive in this pocket, causing the attachment of the tooth and its supporting tissues to break down. The ultimate outcome can be the loss of the tooth.

The Link between Periodontitis and other Health Conditions

Researchers have uncovered potential links between periodontitis and other serious health conditions, which reiterates the link between a healthy mouth and a healthy body:

Diabetes – Gum diseases such as gingivitis can contribute to higher blood glucose levels. Professional treatment of gum disease, combined with regular brushing and flossing, will reduce infection and can help improve blood glucose levels.

Cardiovascular disease – Current evidence suggests periodontitis can lead to systemic inflammation in the arteries, which can in turn lead to cardiovascular disease¹.

Alzheimer's disease – A recent study revealed that missing teeth and chronic inflammation of the mouth can significantly increase the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Systemic inflammation caused by periodontitis can go on to damage brain tissue which can lead to Alzheimer's disease².

Hodgkin's disease – Bacteria that cause gum disease release toxic byproducts into the bloodstream, which can increase levels of blood sugar, cholesterol and C-reactive protein (CRP). If treatment of gum disease does not lower levels of blood sugar, cholesterol and CRP, it could indicate that a patient has an underlying health condition such as Hodgkin's disease³.

¹ Williams, R.C., et al. (2008). *The potential impact of periodontal disease on general health. Current Medical Research and Opinion*, 24(6)

² Gatz, M., et al. (2005). *Potentially modifiable risk factors for dementia: Evidence from identical twins. Alzheimer's & Dementia*, 1(1)

³ The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2007) *Dentists Can Be First to Detect Some Medical Conditions. Medical News Today*.

The ADA says that it is important to practise a regular, effective oral care routine:

- + Plaque must be removed from teeth and gums every day with brushing, flossing and if indicated by a dentist the use of a mouthwash
- + Regular dental assessment visits and professional cleaning is necessary to remove plaque and hard calculus from places a toothbrush and floss may have missed
- + People should eat a well-balanced diet and limit 'between-meal' snacks, especially those high in sugars that are sucked or are sticky
- + People should quit smoking and limit alcohol consumption