

## **GUM DISEASE**

We've probably seen enough toothpaste commercials to know that brushing and flossing every day is the answer to keeping that pearly white smile, but is it enough to prevent decay and gum disease?

Gum disease or periodontal disease is an infection that can cause tooth loss and is associated with several health conditions. Because it is a silent and painless disease, we tend to ignore the bleeding gums, which is the first sign that all is not well. Gingivitis is the mildest form of periodontal disease, where gums become swollen and bleed easily. It is often caused by inadequate oral hygiene but can be reversed with good oral home care and professional treatment. The word 'periodontal' literally means "around the tooth". It is a chronic bacterial infection that affects the gums and bones supporting the teeth. It begins when plaque, that thin film of bacteria, builds up on your teeth after you've eaten that isn't completely removed by brushing. Eventually the bacteria in plaque produces toxins that infiltrate your gums, making them swollen and painful, undermining the tissue and bone that keep your teeth in place.

Gums separate from the teeth, forming pockets (the space between the gum and tooth) which become infected. As the disease continues, the pockets and the gum tissue and bone are destroyed.

### **What is a periodontist?**

They are experts in the diagnosis and treatment of gum disease and can help you keep your teeth for life. They specialize in prevention diagnosis and treatment of periodontal disease and in the placement of dental implants.

### **What is the cause of periodontal disease?**

Plaque is the main cause followed by the use of tobacco and smoking which links to many serious diseases such as cancer, lung disease and heart disease. Stress is also linked to serious conditions such as hypertension and cancer. Research demonstrates that stress can make it more difficult for the body to fight off infection, including periodontal disease. Genetics – some people have a genetic predisposition to periodontal disease; despite aggressive oral care habits, these people are more susceptible, so ask your parents or siblings for their dental history as this info may be important to determine the best treatment for you, especially if you have decided to fall pregnant. A woman's body experiences hormonal changes that can affect many of the tissues in your body, including your gums. They become more sensitive and at these times react strongly to the hormonal fluctuations. This may make you more susceptible to gum disease. One study of Turkish women found that those with periodontal disease had a higher risk of having preterm birth babies and a low birth rate than those without periodontal disease. In addition, a second study found out that having non-surgical treatments for gum disease can actually reduce a woman's risk for developing preterm. "Our study found that treating a woman's periodontal disease decreased her chances of having her baby early by almost 50%", explained author Faizia Tarannum, BDS, MR.Ambeakar Dental College and Hospital, India. "Our research suggests that treatment of periodontal disease can help the health of the mother and her baby".

Dr Hans Van Heerden, periodontist and implantology specialist in Cape Town, recommends weekly checkups if you have bleeding gums. "A patient who comes in with a history of

periodontal disease should have it sorted out before falling pregnant as we cannot do any process with injecting or intrusive work once pregnant. A woman must ensure she flosses and brushes on a daily basis and have regular checkups with the oral hygienist" he advises.

"The American Academy of Periodontology (AAP) is dedicated to increasing awareness about the relationship between periodontal diseases and pregnancy", said Susan Karabin, DDS, President of the AAP. "Working as a team, the dental professional and expectant mother will be able to help deliver a full term, healthy and happy baby".

Avoiding periodontal disease is not just important for keeping teeth for a lifetime, but also in keeping the rest of the body healthy. Healthy hearts and healthy gums play a vital role in keeping a healthy body. Because periodontal disease is a bacterial infection, periodontal bacteria can enter the blood stream and travel to major organs and begin new infections. The heart is one of the most susceptible organs.

### **How does periodontal disease increase my risk for heart disease?**

There are several theories that explain the link between heart and periodontal disease. One theory is that oral bacteria can affect the heart when they enter the blood stream, attaching to the fatty plaques in the coronary arteries (which are the heart blood vessels) and contributing to clot formation. The walls of the coronary arteries thicken due to the build up of fatty proteins and blood clots can obstruct the normal blood flow, restricting the amount of oxygen and nutrients required for the heart to function at peak level. This may lead to a heart attack.

As periodontal disease has been linked to health problems like diabetes, respiratory diseases, osteoporosis, premature and under weight births, it is very important to look after your teeth and gums. Early detection is usually dependant on a diagnosis made by your dentist who would refer you to a periodontist. Together with a physician they can help you protect both your gums and your overall health. To quote former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, "A person is not healthy without good oral health".

*Dr Hans Van Heerden – B.CH.D (Pret) M. CH. D (Stell) Periodontist 021-6832383*

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