



How Oral Health & Heart Disease Are Connected

by Tracey Sandilands

It's increasingly common to hear that oral health is vital for overall health. More than 80 percent of Americans, for example, are living with periodontal or gum disease, which often goes undiagnosed. This may be because the patient's teeth feel fine, so he avoids going to the dentist, and visits to the physician rarely focus on oral health.

According to **Delta Dental**, however, there is now evidence of two specific links between oral health and heart disease. First, recent studies show that if you have gum disease in a moderate or advanced stage, you're at greater risk for heart disease than someone with healthy gums. And second, your oral health can provide doctors with warning signs for a range of diseases and conditions, including those in the heart.

Why Are These Things Related?

Oral health and heart disease are connected by the spread of bacteria – and other germs – from your mouth to other parts of your body through the blood stream. When these bacteria reach the heart, they can attach themselves to any damaged area and cause inflammation. This can result in illnesses such as endocarditis, an infection of the inner lining of the heart, according to **Mayo Clinic**. Other cardiovascular conditions such as atherosclerosis (clogged arteries) and stroke have also been linked to inflammation caused by oral bacteria, according to the **American Heart Association**.

Who Is at Risk?

Patients with chronic gum conditions such as gingivitis or advanced periodontal disease have the highest risk for heart disease caused by poor oral health, particularly if it remains undiagnosed and unmanaged. The bacteria that are associated with gum infection are in the mouth and can enter the blood stream, where they attach to the blood vessels and increase your risk to cardiovascular disease. Even if you don't have noticeable gum inflammation, however, inadequate oral hygiene and accumulated plaque puts you at risk for gum disease. The bacteria can also migrate into your bloodstream causing elevated C-reactive protein, which is a marker for inflammation in the blood vessels. This can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke, according to the **Cleveland Clinic**.

Symptoms and Warning Signs

According to the **American Association of Periodontology (AAP)**, you may have gum disease, even if it's in its early stages, if:

- your gums are red, swollen and sore to the touch.
- your gums bleed when you eat, brush or floss.
- you see pus or other signs of infection around the gums and teeth.
- your gums look as if they are "pulling away" from the teeth.
- you frequently have bad breath or notice a bad taste in your mouth.
- or some of your teeth are loose, or feel as if they are moving away from the other teeth.

Prevention Measures

Good oral hygiene and regular dental examinations are the best way to protect yourself against the development of gum disease. By being proactive about your oral health, you can protect yourself from developing a connection between oral health and heart disease, and keep your smile healthy, clean and beautiful throughout your life.