

The Suspected Link between Gum Disease and Heart Attack and Stroke

By Ellen Zanichelli, RDH, BS

As your Healthcare Provider in Dental Hygiene, I believe that patient education is one of the best ways I can help you stay healthy. Therefore, I would like to share with you that there is current and continued research that suggests that infection from the oral cavity may increase the risk systemic diseases such heart disease and stroke. It is important to identify those individuals who may be at greater risk because of undiagnosed and untreated gum infections. The American Heart Association has identified certain risk factors that increase one's chances of heart and blood vessel diseases.

These include the following:

- Increasing age
- A family history of premature coronary disease
- High blood pressure
- Low HDL cholesterol
- Obesity or being overweight
- African American ethnicity
- Alcohol
- Male gender
- Tobacco smoke
- High LDL cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Physical inactivity
- Stress

In many of the 250,000 sudden deaths from coronary heart disease each year; there was no previous recognition of cardiovascular disease. Moreover, it is extremely important to discuss the risk factors and your specific risk profile with your medical care provider. It is also significant of the 1.5 million heart attacks and 600,000 strokes that occur in United States each year. Almost half will affect people who appear to be healthy without any indicators who have normal to low cholesterol levels.

Now, how might periodontal/ gum disease affect the cardiovascular health? Diseases of the heart and blood vessels are most commonly related to thickening of the wall of arteries called Artherosclerosis. The researchers indicate that Artherosclerosis results in damage to the artery wall, which in turn, results from inflammation within the artery wall along deposits of fat and then leads to development of atheroma or plaque. Many researchers suggest that bacteria from gum infections could be one of the infections that may cause injury to artery wall. The inflammatory tissue response that allows the bacteria to enter the blood stream and may have been initiated in a periodontal/gum pocket. An easier explanation would be, when your gums bleed it creates a path for the bacteria to enter your blood stream. This bacterium can move through blood vessels and to

distant sites within the body, including your heart. When this happens the artery becomes less elastic and the inside of the artery narrow.

Small blood clots may form and arteries get clogged causing the blood flow to be restricted. This results in a heart attack or stroke depending on the location of the blood clot. All of this research is presently under investigation, by medical professionals. So in the meantime it is important for you recognize the following warning signs of gum disease/periodontal disease. Those warning signs are:

- Gums that feel swollen or tender
- Gums that are receding
- Persistent bad breath
- Puss or discharge between your teeth and gums
- Changes in the way your teeth fit together when you bite down
- Loose or mobile teeth
- Sores in your mouth

You should discuss warning signs of gum disease and risk factors for heart disease with your dental or medical providers. It is recommended that adults be evaluated by a dental hygienist or medical provider.

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Please call or come by office with questions or just to make an appointment.

Ellen has been a practicing dental hygiene in Evergreen Community for a couple of decades.

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