

## Healthy Community

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# A healthy mouth could mean healthy heart



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There may be more to having a healthy heart than nutrition and exercise. Add a healthy mouth to the list. February is Dental

Health Month and American Heart Month, so it seems fitting to discuss how dental health is linked to heart disease.

Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water, a healthy diet full of fruits, vegetables and fiber is extremely important, but simply preventing gum disease through good oral hygiene may be equally important. According to Dr. Robert Wilder, from Kootenai Family Dental, "This connection is not a connection that people naturally think of." The American Academy of Periodontology, reports people with gum disease are almost twice as likely to have heart disease, than those without.

Dr. Wilder shares two theories to explain the link. One is that oral bacteria can enter the blood stream and attach to fatty plaques in the coronary arteries contributing to clot forma-

tion. The other suggests diseased gums release significantly higher levels of inflammatory components, called endotoxins which are biomarkers that trigger the liver to make C-reactive proteins which are predictors for increased cardiovascular disease.

Keeping the links between good oral health and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease in mind, the motivation for a healthy mouth goes far beyond the desire for a beautiful smile, free of cavities. Daily brushing and flossing habits as well as smart dietary choices are important, but alone they are not enough. Regular visits to your dentist for thorough examination and cleaning are the only way to know with any certainty that your efforts are paying off. More importantly, it is the only way to ensure that you stop serious problems from arising.

Periodontal disease is often thought of as a silent disease. It doesn't make a grand entrance and the changes leading to it can be subtle and not always easy to detect. Dr. Wilder says that "As a patient you have to be actively involved with your own care. Ask questions and make sure that you have an open dialogue with your dentist about any changes that you have noticed, not just in your

oral health but your health in general. These discussions can be helpful in identifying problems before they get too serious."

One final note to consider is that periodontal disease is a condition that really lasts a lifetime once it has started to do damage. Like any disease process it can go through periods of greater or lesser activity but once present, only ongoing treatment on a very consistent basis can keep it in check. This means more frequent periodontal maintenance visits to your dentist, or periodontist in more severe cases, and potentially more aggressive therapy such as "Scaling and Root Planing" or even periodontal surgery. Periodontal maintenance schedules are every three to four months.

Here are some heart healthy-mouth healthy prevention tips:

- Regular exams two times a year
- Reduce snacking between meals
- Eat a well-balanced diet that includes a lot of fruits and vegetables and limited amounts of sugary foods
- Eliminate any Tobacco Habits

And last, but not least, let's not forget that one of the most powerful weapons might be sitting on the bathroom counter—your toothbrush and floss.