

Periodontal (Gum) Disease and Systemic Health Connections

It is estimated that 80 percent of American adults currently have some form of periodontitis. Periodontal diseases range from simple gum inflammation to more serious disease which results in damage to the supporting structures of your teeth and tooth loss. Periodontal disease has also been linked to other serious health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and preterm premature babies.

Periodontal disease is caused by bacteria. Our mouths are full of bacteria. These bacteria reside on sticky, colorless "plaque" on teeth. Brushing and flossing help us get rid of plaque. Plaque that is not removed can harden and form bacteria-harboring "tartar" that brushing and flossing can't remove. Only a professional cleaning by a dentist or dental hygienist can remove tartar.

Periodontal disease can be diagnosed early as gingivitis. As plaque and tartar remain on teeth, they accumulate more bacteria. The body senses these bacteria and mounts an immune response against the bacteria which causes inflammation of the gums. In gingivitis, the gums become red, swollen and can bleed easily. Gingivitis is a mild form of gum disease which can usually be reversed with daily brushing and flossing, and a regular cleaning by your dentist.

When gingivitis is not treated, it can advance to "periodontitis" (which means "inflammation around the tooth.") In periodontitis, the gums pull away from the teeth and form "pockets" that are infected. The normal pocket space between tooth and gum is usually 1-3 mm. Pockets 4 mm and greater signify periodontal disease. As the body's immune system fights the bacteria present in the tartar, bacterial toxins and the body's enzymes fighting the infection actually start to break down the bone and connective tissue that hold teeth in place causing deeper pocket depths. If periodontal disease is not treated, the loss of bone support causes teeth to become loose and they eventually need to be extracted or pulled.

Symptoms of periodontal disease include bad breath that won't go away, red or swollen gums, tender or bleeding gums, painful chewing, loose teeth and/or sensitive teeth. Because periodontitis progresses slowly people usually don't pay attention to the symptoms of gum disease until they get a sudden swelling and/or a loose tooth which needs to be pulled.

Because periodontal disease is caused by bacteria, it is theorized that the bacteria is the link between periodontal disease and systemic health conditions. In the periodontal disease and heart disease link it is theorized that oral bacteria affects the heart when they enter the blood stream, attaching to fatty plaques in the heart blood vessels and contributing to clot formation. These clots can obstruct normal blood flow, restricting the amount of nutrients and oxygen required for the heart to function properly. This can lead to heart attacks. Researchers have found that people with periodontal disease are almost twice as likely to suffer from coronary artery disease as those without periodontal disease and studies have pointed to a relationship between periodontal disease and stroke. People with diabetes are more likely to have periodontal disease than people without diabetes, probably because diabetics are more susceptible to contracting infections. Studies have suggested that pregnant women who have periodontal disease may be seven times more likely to have a baby that is born too early and too small.

Periodontal disease can be treated to minimize the contribution to systemic health conditions. The main goal of treatment is to control the infection. The dentist removes the plaque through a deep-cleaning method called scaling and root planning. Scaling and root planning involves scraping off the tartar from above and below the gum line. After scaling and root planning you will need to visit the dentist every three months for periodontal maintenance. It is impossible to clean pockets deeper than 3 mm at home and so when pockets are present greater than 3 mm it is important to have a dentist clean your teeth every three months. At this visit the dentist will measure your pockets to see if your periodontal disease is getting better or worse and treat accordingly.

You can prevent periodontal diseases by brushing your teeth twice a day (with fluoride toothpaste), flossing daily and visiting your dentist routinely for a check-up and professional cleaning.

Written by Carlos Vallecillo, DDS and Rossana Menna, DDS
www.monalisadental.com