

Nearly 75 percent of American adults suffer from various forms of periodontal (gum) disease and don't know it. Though reversible in its initial stages, mounting evidence of the relationship between oral bacteria and life-threatening diseases such as oral cancer; heart disease; diabetes, respiratory ailments; and premature, low birth-weight babies makes it critical that the condition be prevented or treated aggressively.

Oral Cancer—Each year, nearly 30,000 new cases are diagnosed and almost 9,000 people die from the disease. Oral cancer is more common than leukemia, skin melanoma, Hodgkin's disease and cancers of the brain, liver, thyroid gland, stomach, ovaries and cervix. Curable in its early stages, it can be treated successfully in more than 90 percent of cases. However, if not detected early enough, it can spread to other parts of the body and become nearly impossible to treat.

Heart Disease—The number one killer among men and women. Claiming more victims than all forms of cancer and AIDS combined, the disease affects more than 58 million Americans each year, killing almost a million. Numerous research studies

have shown a link between cardiovascular disease and key bacterium in periodontal disease. While research continues to explore the link, it is important to treat periodontal disease aggressively so its impact on heart disease can be reduced or eliminated.

Dealing with Gum Disease *A Life-Threatening Health Risk*

Diabetes—A chronic disease with no cure, diabetes is the fourth leading cause of death among Americans and will result in more than 169,000 deaths this year alone. It is estimated that nearly 16 million people in the U.S. have the disease, yet as many as half of those who do are unaware of their condition. Approximately, 95 percent of Americans with diabetes also have periodontal disease, due in part to an increased susceptibility to infections. Research has shown that



people with periodontal disease have more difficulty controlling their blood sugar levels while periodontal disease can increase the risk of developing diabetes.

Respiratory Ailments—Respiratory conditions can be aggravated when bacteria from periodontal disease travels from the mouth to the lungs and lower respiratory system. Conversely, patients who have other diseases are at an increased risk of developing breathing problems.

Babies—Studies have shown that mothers with periodontal disease are up to seven times more likely to deliver premature, low birth-weight babies. Researchers believe that since periodontal disease is a bacterial infection, it may trigger an increase in labor inducing body fluids, leading to premature delivery.

Other Connections—Signs and symptoms of osteoporosis, a bone condition affecting approximately 25 million Americans and accounting for 1.5 million fractures each year; eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia; and HIV, the virus that causes AIDS; often appears in the mouth first and can be detected during a routine oral health exam.

Early detection by a dental hygienist can lead to aggressive treatment and the control of periodontal disease, in turn, preventing many of the health and life diseases associated with it.

Signs and symptoms of periodontal disease may include:

- Red, swollen, or tender gums
- Bleeding gums while brushing or flossing
- Loose or separating teeth
- Tooth loss
- Pus around the teeth and gums
- Pain when chewing
- A change in the way your teeth fit together when you bite
- A change in the fit of partials or dentures

In addition to helping patients understand the connection between oral health care and overall health, dental hygienists educate patients about proper oral hygiene and treat periodontal disease to prevent the condition from advancing and complicating other diseases.

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For more information about proper oral health care, as well as brushing and flossing instructions, please ask your registered dental hygienist, visit the ADHA Web site at, www.adha.org, or call ADHA's consumer hotline toll free at 1-800-847-6718.

**Fact sheet prepared by
Thomas Moloney**



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