

# Oral Health and Overall Health

Most people don't connect their mouths to the rest of their bodies. There is a link. Research shows that tooth decay (cavities) and periodontal (gum) disease may contribute to many serious health conditions. With mounting scientific evidence, the connection between oral infections and other diseases in the body is becoming widely understood and accepted.

Gum disease and cavities are chronic, contagious oral infections that can lead to major health concerns and negatively affect the course of other diseases and treatments. Prevention is considered key to maintaining good overall health. Proper oral care and regular professional scaling (cleaning) by a dental hygienist are important for keeping the mouth and body healthy.

Health Canada, The World Health Organization, the Ontario government and data from international research continue to place emphasis on health prevention and the knowledge that "the public cannot be healthy without oral health."

## THE MOUTH-BODY CONNECTION

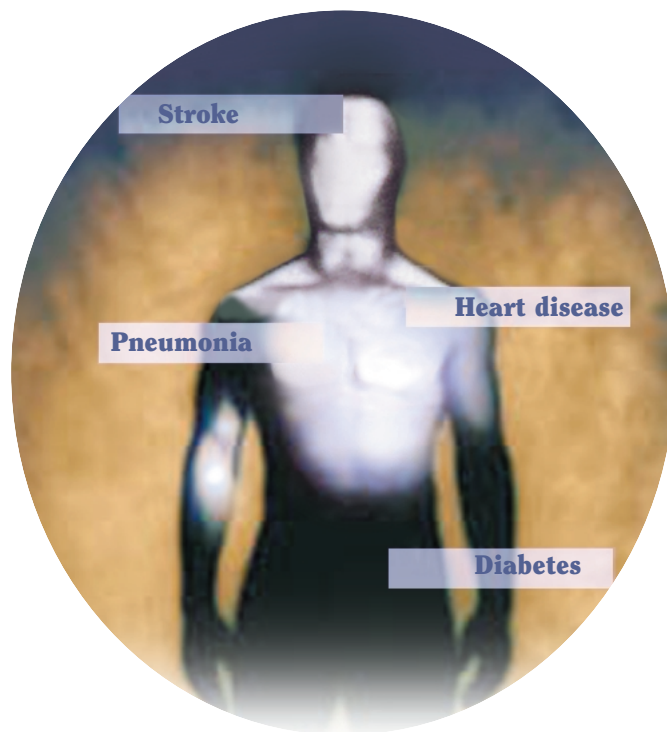
Some research studies strongly suggest a link between periodontal (gum) disease and a person's overall health. Micro-organisms (e.g., bacteria) from oral infections can enter the blood stream or airways and travel to other parts of the body. These micro-organisms have the potential to worsen or increase the risk for other types of health problems such as heart disease, stroke and respiratory disorders. Gum infections can also make it difficult to control diabetes and may contribute to premature and/or low birth weight babies.

### According to ongoing studies:

**Heart disease and stroke** – Bacteria from diseased gums can contribute to the formation of artery-clogging plaques and to infective endocarditis, a condition in which the interior lining of the heart and heart valves become inflamed. Left untreated, this condition could lead to a fatal infection.

*A national study of Canadians between the ages of 36 and 69 found that those with severe gum disease had between three to seven times the risk of fatal coronary heart disease. Similarly, a university study found that those with cavities and gum disease suffered strokes twice as often as those with good oral health.*

**Respiratory disorders** – Some respiratory infections are caused by inhaling micro-organisms from the mouth and throat into the lungs. When these micro-organisms reach the lower respiratory tract, they may cause an infection or worsen an existing lung infection such as pneumonia, bronchitis, emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).



**Diabetes** – People living with diabetes are prone to a variety of bacterial infections, including gum disease. Oral infections can make it difficult to control diabetes and cause complications, since the bacteria from severe gum disease may increase both blood sugar levels and the length of time the body struggles with high blood sugar.

**Pregnancy** – Bacteria from gum disease may trigger an inflammatory response that might induce premature labour and delivery.

Poor oral health has been linked to sleeping problems, as well as behavioural and developmental problems in children. Also, researchers are reporting a connection between oral health and some cancers, e.g., oral cancer, pancreatic cancer.

## THE ROLE OF THE DENTAL HYGIENIST

While it was once believed that the worst outcome of gum disease was tooth loss, it is becoming well known that oral infections have the potential to worsen or cause other types of health problems. The mouth is a critical factor in determining what is going on in the rest of the body.

Dental hygienists have a distinctive clinical role in preventing gum disease and tooth decay, thereby making a significant

contribution to a person's well-being and overall health. As important members of the oral health-care team, their primary concern is promoting good oral health.

With regular, professional scaling, dental hygienists help control the bacteria that cause gum disease and tooth decay. Maintaining good oral health requires collaboration. Dental hygienists work with many health-care professionals and may refer clients to oral surgeons, physicians, dermatologists, nutritionists, pharmacists and dentists.

Dental hygiene care and treatment includes:

- Reviewing the client's medical history to make sure there are no medical conditions that could affect treatment.
- Examining the head, neck and mouth including teeth, gums and tongue, which includes oral cancer screening to detect anything unusual, such as a sore or lesion that may indicate early stages of oral cancer.
- Using a dental hygiene instrument (periodontal probe) to measure pockets and documenting the findings.
- Scaling teeth to remove plaque bacteria and hardened or calcified plaque buildup (tartar).
- Providing education and counselling on oral disease prevention and sun safety.



## STAYING HEALTHY

With regular and effective oral care, gum disease can be prevented, controlled or even reversed in the early stages. Between dental hygiene appointments, it is important to maintain good oral hygiene:

- Brush twice a day for two minutes using a soft toothbrush and fluoridated toothpaste.
- Clean or floss between teeth and gums once a day to remove food and plaque.
- Clean or scrape the tongue daily.
- Use a mouth rinse, if recommended by a dental professional.
- Check gums/mouth regularly and report any changes or signs of gum disease to a dental hygienist.
- Conduct self-examinations for oral cancer. (See Fact Sheet on "Oral Cancer Self-Examination")
- Use sunscreen with an appropriate SPF for lips and skin protection.
- Eat a nutritional, well-balanced diet – follow Canada's Food Guide.
- Don't smoke or use smokeless tobacco.

*As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated health-care professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.*

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