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Gum Disease Can Trigger Host of Problems

Left untreated, it can contribute to ills ranging from diabetes to heart trouble

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SATURDAY, Oct. 14 (HealthDay News) -- When people think about poor oral hygiene, problems like decaying teeth, bad gums and offensive breath typically come to mind.

But experts say an unhealthy, bacteria-filled mouth can also lead to a host of problems *throughout* the body, such as heart disease, diabetes, blood infection and even low birth-weight babies.

And the culprit, more often than not, is gum disease.

"When you're looking at people who have gum disease, they are suffering from a chronic low-grade infection," said Jean Connor, a dental hygienist in Cambridge, Mass., and president-elect of the American Dental Hygienists' Association. "Your whole body is a little bit compromised."

A growing body of research is finding that gum disease -- sometimes called periodontal disease -- can exacerbate a wide array of health problems. And it's not something that just affects a small segment of the population. Four of every five Americans suffer from some form of gum disease, according to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, part of the National Institutes of Health.

Gum disease is suspected of contributing to ailments through the bloodstream. Bacteria from the mouth flood into the circulatory system and travel to other parts of the body, causing widespread inflammation.

Another possibility is that oral infections trigger the immune system, producing inflammation elsewhere in the body.

"If you had an infection in your finger and you left it, it eventually would affect the rest of the body," Connor said. "It's the same with your mouth."

Recent studies have shown an increased risk of heart disease and stroke in people with gum infections, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The risk appears to increase with the severity of the infection.

"Gum disease produces a tremendous amount of bacteria," Connor said. "If you have a valve problem with your heart, the bacteria can invade and infect the heart."

There also appears to be a link between gum infections and diabetes, as people with diabetes are more likely to have periodontal disease, according to the CDC. Researchers are now looking into whether there's a two-way connection between the conditions to see if diabetes can be better controlled through treatment of gum disease.

Blood infection from gum disease can even cause joint replacements to fail by aiding the body's efforts to reject the

artificial implant, said Diann Bomkamp, a dental hygienist in St. Louis, and vice president of the American Dental Hygienists' Association.

Other researchers have found that women with moderate-to-serious gum disease are twice as likely to give birth to premature babies. Problems ranging from low birth-weight to birth defects can result.

"If you are pregnant and you have gum disease, there may be problems in your pregnancy and with birth," said Bomkamp.

Gum disease ranges from gingivitis -- a mild and common form that causes inflammation of tissues around the teeth -- to more serious forms like periodontitis, where the inflammation affects the connective tissue supporting the teeth. An estimated 20 percent of Americans have periodontitis, and it's the primary cause of tooth loss in adults.

Regular and thorough brushing and flossing is the first line of defense against gum disease, Bomkamp said. A good diet that avoids sugary snacks and sodas is another.

"We are seeing people who are drinking soda for breakfast and then drink it all day long," Bomkamp said. "Even with diet soda, you have acid in the soda that can attack the teeth and gums."

People should limit the number of snacks eaten throughout the day, according to the CDC. They should also keep in mind that the recommended five-a-day helpings of fiber-rich fruits and vegetables have oral health benefits as well, stimulating salivary flow to aid remineralization of tooth surfaces with early stages of tooth decay.

Parents should take care not to share drinks with their children, particularly if the adults have gum disease, Bomkamp said. Even an act as simple as blowing on food to cool it can pass oral bacteria from parent to child.

"It's a bug thing, and the bugs can be transmitted from caregiver to child," Bomkamp said.

People also should make sure they drink fluoridated water and use a fluoride toothpaste -- something to reconsider in these days of bottled water. "Lots of people today are drinking bottled water, and they're removing one of the best sources they have for preventing tooth decay and they don't even realize it," she said.

You should also avoid tobacco -- smokers have seven times the risk of developing gum disease than non-smokers -- and limit alcohol intake.

Finally, visit the dentist regularly. Check-ups can provide early detection of oral problems, and lead to treatments that can prevent further damage.

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