

Why is it important to have a healthy mouth at all stages of life?

Most dental diseases are silent till at an advanced stage yet most people only visit the dentist when there is a problem. Examples of dental diseases are gum disease, early decay, erosion, excessive attrition and early oral cancer.

So why is it important to make sure that our mouth is in a healthy state all times of our lives especially when we are medically healthy? This can be achieved with thorough check ups and Xrays as well as regular maintenance visits to the dentist. The reason is that when we are diagnosed with a chronic or terminal disease , there is often not enough time to make sure that our mouth is healthy before starting the treatment of our medical illness. If we have gum disease or decay in the mouth and should need dental care after the aggressive medical treatment has started, it is often very difficult to get an ideal result dentally. Also, there are some medical conditions that affect our oral condition and vice versa.

Some examples are given below:

Diabetes

Diabetes and periodontal (gum) disease have one thing in common. Both are chronic (long-term) diseases that can never be truly cured but can definitely be well controlled.

People with diabetes are more likely to have periodontal disease than people without diabetes. In fact, periodontal disease is often considered the sixth complication of diabetes. Those people who don't have their diabetes under control are especially at risk. They also heal slower with periodontal (gum) treatment.

Diabetics, who are under optimal control, have HbA1c readings which are consistently less than 7 %. Well-controlled diabetics respond better to periodontal treatment and are less likely to lose teeth compared to poorly-controlled diabetics.

There is also some research to suggest that the relationship between periodontal disease and diabetes goes both ways - periodontal disease may make it more difficult for people who have diabetes to control their blood sugar.

Heart Conditions and High Blood Pressure

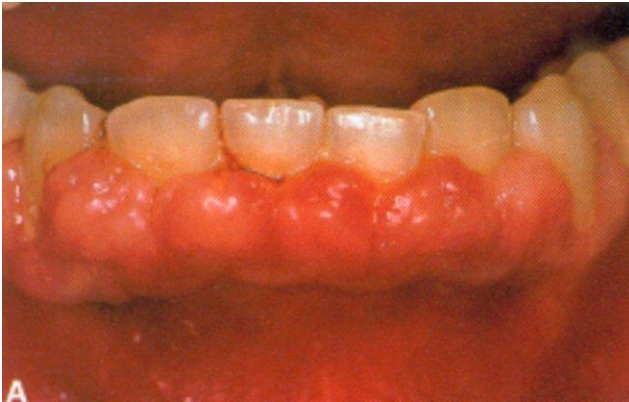
There has been some research to show an association between gum disease and heart attacks. Apparently, people with advanced gum disease run a higher risk of getting a heart attack. This is however, an association and a direct link has yet to be proven. A particular medication for high blood pressure, nifedipine, has

also a side effect of producing gum hypertrophy (enlargement) usually in patients who already have gum disease. There are many other medications that have an impact on the gums as well.

Medications and the oral condition

Hyperplastic (overgrowth) gums.

Medication such as Nifedipine, Cyclosporin, which is used in transplant cases eg kidney transplant patients and an epilepsy drug can cause overgrowth of the gums. This in turn makes it difficult for the patient to keep his gums and teeth clean and increases his risk of periodontal (gum) disease.



This condition can be treated successfully by the Periodontist to give a normal looking appearance again. Good follow ups and maintenance on a regular basis can keep this condition under control.

Bisphosphonates eg Forsamax

Forsamax is a commonly used medication to treat **osteoporosis** especially in the post-menopausal woman. Other bisphosphonates such as Zometa are used to treat certain cancers and other bone diseases. Unfortunately, in those patients on bisphosphonates such as Forsamax, there is a small risk to contract osteonecrosis (bone death and possible infection) of the jaw bone whenever an extraction needs to be done, oral surgery or implant surgery. Those on intravenous bisphosphonates such as Zometa have a much higher risk of contracting osteonecrosis even when none of these surgeries are done.

Hence, those patients on these drugs should ensure they have good dental health and regular follow ups. Should osteonecrosis happen, it responds very poorly to treatment.

Radiotherapy in the head and neck region

Those patients who have gone through radiotherapy for cancers in the head and neck region, the most common being nasopharyngeal cancer, suffer from lack of

saliva flow after the therapy. This leads to a dry mouth, ulcers, burning gums and an increased risk to decay and gum disease.

Various prescription and over the counter creams, mouthwashes and ointments can help alleviate all these conditions. Such patients should seek dental clearance and treatment before and after radiotherapy to avoid long term dental problems which become major.

Conclusion

Don't wait till the symptoms arise to seek dental treatment, it may cost you more than just money or time to rectify the problem. Often, an ideal result cannot be obtained even with both. A healthy mouth will mean a healthy body at all times.