

The Monster In Your Mouth

What if I told you that there is a disease that 85-90% of people over the age of 35 have in some form, many without knowing about it? What if I told you that this same disease contributes to heart disease, diabetes, premature and low birth weight babies, respiratory diseases, osteoporosis, and stroke? Not to mention making your food not taste as good, giving you bad breath, and making your teeth actually fall out? Do I have your attention? Now what if I told you this disease was easily treatable by your DENTIST, of all people?

The disease I am speaking of is called periodontal disease, or sometimes gum disease or "pyorrhea". It is most simply described as an infection of the spaces or pockets that form where your teeth enter into your gums and jawbones. These bacteria get under your gums and form hard deposits. They then sit there and eat away at the bone holding in your teeth. When enough bone has been dissolved, your teeth may become loose or abscess.

In recent years, this type of infection has been linked to many bodily ailments, including heart disease, the leading cause of death in the United States. Oral bacteria can affect the heart when they enter the blood stream, attaching fatty plaques to the coronary arteries and contributing to blood clot formation. This can lead to a heart attack. Researchers have found that people with periodontal disease are twice as likely to suffer from coronary artery disease as those without it. The same type of blood clots and plaques are also linked to strokes. Makes you want to go brush your teeth, doesn't it?

Another extremely strong connection exists between gum disease and preterm, low birth weight babies. Infections of the mouth can trigger hormone production that induce labor. Women with periodontal problems may be SEVEN TIMES more likely to deliver a baby too early and too small. That's a really big likelihood! It's even higher for women whose oral conditions worsen during their pregnancy.

And that's not all! Severe periodontal problems can increase blood sugar, causing problems for diabetics. Fine droplets of saliva can also be inhaled

into the lungs, causing infections such as pneumonia or worsening existing respiratory problems. Osteoporosis, a loss of bone density particularly found in women, also contributes to periodontal disease and the loss of bone around the teeth. And teeth don't do any good if there is nothing to hold them in place.

So what do you do about putting a stop to this monster in your mouth? Visit your dentist and be sure to ask him about the condition of your gums. He should make a diagnosis by looking at your gums, making measurements of how deep the areas are around your teeth, and by looking at x-rays. Treatment involves cleaning out the bacteria from under your gums with a special instrument, usually while your mouth is numb, placing medicine around the teeth, and teaching you ways to keep the bacteria from coming back. Periodontal disease is never completely cured, but with regular maintenance and good care at home, you can continue to have a healthy mouth and healthy body. And it's a much easier way to avoid a heart attack than giving up fried food...

Dr. Greg Grobmyer