

## **Healthy Gums, Healthy Heart?**

For decades the mouth has been treated separately from the rest of the body. I like to joke that "they skip the mouth in medical school," which physicians I speak with agree is at least partly true. As medicine progresses, though, there is an increasing amount of concrete evidence linking the mouth to the body. This "Oral-Systemic Connection" as we like to call it, is not just a hypothesis anymore, it is becoming fact.

### **What's the connection?**

For many years we have known that there is a link between periodontal disease (unhealthy gums) and diabetes. Although we do not know the cause of that link (which came first, the chicken or the egg?), it has stimulated further study into how the mouth relates to the rest of the body. There is now mounting evidence that unhealthy gums and infections of the teeth cause increased risk of stroke and heart attack. The culprit, it appears, is chronic inflammation.

### **A smoldering fire**

Inflammation is good at times, like when a finger is cut, where the warmth and redness around a healing wound tells us the body is sending its emergency cells to speed up the recovery. Chronic inflammation in the gums, though, does not stay localized... it flows through the bloodstream, constantly irritating the arteries carrying it. In anyone who has any family history of heart attack or stroke, this irritation can be the trigger to a potentially tragic event.

### **The bottom line**

The key to avoiding life threatening cardiovascular events is a balance of many things, but the list is getting shorter, Healthy gums, healthy heart, may be oversimplifying it a bit, but it is certain that without healthy gums, there can be no healthy heart.

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