

Open Wide! A Window to Good Health

by Kim Ivan, RDH

Did you know that your mouth speaks volumes about your overall health? To a trained professional, the mouth provides important clues about a variety of health-related problems with the mouth often being the source.

Periodontal or gum disease can cause oral pain and discomfort as well as tooth loss. However, most people don't realize that it can also seriously affect a person's overall health. The connection between oral infections and other diseases in the body is becoming understood and accepted within the health care community. A position paper published by the Canadian Dental Association in 2005, ("Association Between Periodontal Disease and Systemic Disease"), places oral health in the perspective of systemic health and suggests that the dental and medical professions need to develop even closer ties in the future. In addition, evidence presented in a position paper published by The American Academy of Periodontology (AAP), ("Periodontal Disease as a Potential Risk Factor for Systemic Diseases," Frank A. Scannapieco, State University of New York, 1998) confirms the correlation between oral health and a person's general health and personal well-being.

The findings of both reports emphasize the importance of good oral hygiene and the individual's role in the prevention of oral disease and the role of self-education regarding the importance of good oral health.

Periodontal disease is one of the most common human diseases and, according to the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, as many as 75 per cent of adults over the age of 30 may suffer from some form of gum disease at some point in their lives.

The AAP position paper explains that if left untreated, infective bacteria can enter the bloodstream or airways from the gums, increasing the risk of stroke, heart and respiratory diseases. It also states that controlling diabetes is more difficult in the presence of gum disease. Over time, a buildup of bacteria in a film called plaque collects at the gum line and if not removed on a daily basis, may eventually harden on the teeth forming calculus or tartar. If plaque is not removed



by daily flossing and brushing, or if tartar is not removed by professional cleanings, inflammatory destruction of gum tissue may ultimately result in bone and tooth loss.

Key indicators of periodontal disease are swollen and red gums that bleed when flossing or brushing. Bleeding gums should never be considered normal. With regular and comprehensive oral care, gum disease can be prevented, controlled or even reversed.

The Best Mouth Health Plan

Fewer than five minutes a day is all that is required to maintain or improve oral hygiene. The Ontario Dental Hygienists' Association recommends brushing twice a day, with a soft toothbrush, for two minutes using fluoridated toothpaste. As well, people should floss or clean between teeth and scrape or brush the tongue once a day.

Oral Health Tips:

- Replace your toothbrush every couple of months as it can harbour bacteria, fungi and viruses. Also replace when bristles splay or after a cold or flu.
- Frequent consumption of acidic foods—pop, juices, citrus fruits, etc.—can eventually dissolve tooth enamel, causing sensitivity, unsightly appearance and possibly tooth loss. Rinse with water or chew sugarless gum after eating to help stimulate saliva and reduce acids that cause enamel erosion and tooth decay.
- Choose raw fruit and vegetables or hard cheese for between-meal snacks. (Chewing increases saliva flow which has a natural cleansing action to help protect the teeth from decay.)
- Wear a mouth guard at all times when participating in sports.
- Schedule regular dental hygiene checkups throughout your lifetime, even if you wear dentures.

Partners in Oral Health

Maintaining good oral health and overall health requires a collaborative or “team” approach. Knowing the roles and functions of your team can help you to maximize your oral health plan. Most people are familiar with what their family dentist does, but few people know the extent of the role that dental hygienists play as team members in oral health. In addition to cleaning teeth, they also take medical history; examine the head, neck and mouth; plan and implement treatments; record health changes; contact physicians to ensure clients at risk are properly medicated prior to treatment; make referrals to oral surgeons and dermatologists when suspicious sores or lesions are detected during oral cancer screening; confer with pharmacists, nurse practitioners and dietitians; and develop in-home care programs.

For those who are unable to travel, are pressed for time or prefer a home setting to that of a more public dental office, recent legislative changes enable dental hygienists to work independently and as clients we can now choose how and where we want to receive our preventive oral care. For added convenience, independently run dental hygiene clinics and mobile services increase access to affordable oral care. Convenience has become increasingly important for group homes, low income families, associations, corporations and underserved communities. These mobile and independent services offer a welcome shift in proactive oral health care.

Ultimately, good oral health is in the hands (or mouth) of the individual. Those armed with knowledge and information will have more success in adhering to a solid maintenance plan so it is a good idea to get started right away. Open wide and let your oral health professional get you started on a journey to good health.★

Learn more at www.odha.on.ca

Kim Ivan has been a registered dental hygienist for 24 years, lecturer and author of articles on oral health issues. She is President-elect of the Ontario Dental Hygienists' Association (ODHA) and the recipient of ODHA's Distinguished Service and Community Service Awards.

