

## HOW THE DENTIST COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE

### HEART DISEASE

It sounds unlikely, but bad teeth, bleeding gums and poor dental hygiene can end up causing heart disease. Several studies confirm a link between gum disease and atherosclerosis, a narrowing of the blood vessels that can lead to a heart attack.

The problem is that bleeding gums provide an entry into the blood for up to 700 different types of bacteria found in the mouth. Microbiologists at the University of Bristol have discovered that when bacteria get into the bloodstream, they stick to tiny fragments called platelets, causing them to clot.

This can lead to partial blockages of blood vessels, increasing the risk of heart disease and heart attack. So it doesn't matter how fit, slim or healthy you are, your chances of getting heart disease are increased by having bad teeth.

### STROKE

Brush your teeth well and floss regularly to protect your brain. Poor tooth brushing and bleeding, infected gums raises your risk of stroke in the same way as it does heart disease – by allowing bacteria into the bloodstream.

A study published in the journal 'Stroke' found that stroke risk increases with the severity of gum disease. Astonishingly, those with severe gum disease had more than four times the risk of suffering a stroke than those with mild gum disease.

### ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Research has long associated oral health with a raised risk of dementia, although studies have not made it clear how the state of the teeth affect mental function. Last year, researchers found a link between mild memory loss and gum disease. A major health grant, welcomed by the British Dental Health Foundation, has recently been given to help scientists study this link.

### OBESITY

Bacteria in our mouths could play a direct part in causing obesity. A study in the Journal of Dental Research found that one species of bacteria – *Selenomonas noxia* – was present at above-average levels in all overweight women. Whether or not this bacteria helps to cause obesity or hinders weight loss is being researched.

### DIABETES

Last month, research published from a study at New York University showed that the overwhelming majority of gum disease sufferers were also found to be at high risk of developing diabetes. The link was so strong and significant that researchers concluded that dentists should offer diabetes screening in their practices.

## PREMATURE BIRTHS

Pregnant women with high levels of oral bacteria linked to tooth decay and cavities are at risk of giving birth to low-weight or premature babies. The study, in the Journal of Periodontology, adds to a growing of research which shows a link between a pregnant woman's oral health and the health of her newborn. Dr Dasanayake, professor of Dentistry at New York University, who conducted the research, hypothesises that caries-causing bacteria can travel to the uterus in the blood, where they trigger a reaction that leads to contractions and early birth. The good news is that research at Columbia University College found that dental care before or during pregnancy can significantly lower the risk of premature birth.

## TIPS FOR HEALTHY GUMS...

Research indicates that inflammation of the gums and bleeding – which allows oral bacteria to spread around the body in the blood – is linked to a raised risk of serious health problems. Unfortunately, gum disease is common, yet unless severe, it often goes unnoticed. In mild gum disease, you may have inflamed gums but little bleeding. Only once it gets worse do people tend to take notice. At this stage, your risk of health problems elsewhere is already higher. Meanwhile, the infection in your gums will be causing gum recession and bone loss, increasing the risk of cavities and tooth loss.

Good gum health is maintained through regular tooth brushing – twice daily – and tooth flossing, ideally after every meal to remove food trapped between your teeth. Crucially, you should see a dental hygienist every six months. Professional tooth cleaning removes plaque, calcified deposits that build up on teeth and beneath the gums. Preventing the build-up of this plaque is vital as bacteria thrive on it. Left in place, even thorough tooth brushing and flossing is unlikely to keep your gums healthy.