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ORAL HEALTH AND DIABETES

Diabetes has long been associated with an increased prevalence, extent and severity of gingivitis and other periodontal diseases. More recently, researchers are looking at whether periodontal disease contributes to difficulty in controlling diabetes by making cells more resistant to insulin. With the world wide incidence of diabetes expected to increase by up to 50 % over the next 15 years (Canadian Diabetes Association), it is important this link is fully explored.

Dr. Tim McGaw, Professor of Oral Medicine and Pathology at the University of Alberta, says, “As dentists, we know that people with poorly controlled diabetes are more likely to have oral health problems and that observation is backed up with conclusive research.”

One of the adverse effects on oral health that stem from poorly controlled diabetes includes dry mouth (xerostomia), a condition where the body produces less saliva than the norm. Since saliva is a natural cleaner for the teeth and gums, and contains anti-bacterial and tooth-remineralizing substances, its absence can cause increased tooth decay and gum infection.

Other adverse effects from poorly controlled diabetes are changes in the white blood cells that make them less resistant to fighting bacteria, changes in the small blood vessels and circulation, and elevated glucose levels in tissues – all of which contribute to periodontal disease.

“The relationship between periodontal disease and diabetes appears to be a two-way street,” says McGaw. “Preliminary studies have documented that when the periodontal disease is cleaned up or managed through improved personal oral care, professional cleaning and scaling, and/or antibiotics, there has also been improvement in the medical control of the diabetes.”

As with many medical conditions, there appears to be a strong link between oral health and overall health. If continued studies support the gathering evidence, improving a diabetic’s oral health may contribute to controlling diabetes in the same way as diet and exercise.

Articles documenting the link between diabetes and periodontal disease can be found in the Journal of the American Dental Association online at www.jada.ada.org. For more information about oral health and diabetes, talk to your dentist or go to the Alberta Dental Association and College website www.abda.ab.ca.

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