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INFORMATION BULLETIN

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ORAL HEALTH AND HEART DISEASE

February is Heart and Stroke Month, Most people are aware of some of the risk factors for heart disease and stroke: family history, diet, obesity, smoking, a sedentary lifestyle (couch potato syndrome), aging or a pre-existing condition such as diabetes. But how many of us know that infected teeth and gums may pose an additional risk?

“It is well accepted by the health community that untreated chronic infection can compromise health,” said Dr. Doug Pettigrew, a Periodontist based in Edmonton. “Gum disease is no different. If you have pockets of infection around all of your teeth that is equivalent to having a 6” open wound on your skin. Your body is weakened from fighting the infection and at the same time, the bacteria and chemicals that enter your blood stream can, in turn, compromise your health.”

Studies have suggested that chemical mediators of inflammation released in untreated periodontal disease may result in changes in the inner lining of blood vessels including those leading to the heart that increase the risk of atherosclerosis and blood clots. Although there is no proof of direct cause-and-effect, there is evidence that periodontal disease appears to be moderately associated with coronary artery disease, stroke and peripheral vascular disease according to Dr. Pettigrew.

Patients with periodontal disease may also find that it can complicate or postpone another planned medical surgery. “People scheduled for heart valve, hip or knee replacements; kidney transplants; and some other procedures must get a letter from a dentist stating they are free of periodontal disease, otherwise the surgery may not proceed,” said Dr. Pettigrew. “Surgeons want their patients to be free from dental or periodontal infection before they undergo these procedures. Pre-existing infections such as gum disease may risk infection at the surgical site, resulting in serious complications.”

For a person with periodontal disease, treatment may take as long as 1-2 years to clear up. But for most of us, it’s a simple matter of maintaining good oral health by brushing, flossing, and scheduling regular visits to the dentist for a check-up and professional cleaning and scaling. “If gum disease is treated early, it is easy and inexpensive to treat,” adds Pettigrew. “If people ignore signs of poor oral health such as bleeding gums, the condition may become more serious and treatment will be more difficult and expensive resulting in unnecessary tooth loss.”

For more information about oral health and cardiovascular disease, talk to your dentist or go to the Alberta Dental Association and College website www.abda.ab.ca.

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