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Gum Disease Bad for Heart

February 2, 2010 by Peggy Rowland

During American Heart Month, treat your heart right by taking care of your gums. At the end of January, I reminded you about Wear Red Day (Feb. 5) and all the widely discussed risk factors for heart disease. However, another risk factor may be lurking inside your mouth. The good news is that it can be taken care of.



A large number of Americans have some form of gum (periodontal) disease. If it isn't treated, it may possibly lead to heart disease. Researchers believe that if you have periodontal disease, you may be twice as likely to suffer from coronary artery disease compared to people without periodontal disease. Managing gum disease may help reduce the risk for heart disease.

New guidelines, part of a consensus paper published in the American Journal of Cardiology and the Journal of Periodontology, encourage cardiologists to perform oral health exams. Periodontists are also encouraged to ask about patient heart health and family history of heart disease.

"There's no longer any question about the strong relationship between the two diseases, and patients with one condition should be checked immediately for the other," says Dr. Edgard El Chaar, DDS, MS, a

periodontist based in New York City. Dr. El Chaar specializes in the prevention and treatment of gum disease, and he's an advocate for educating patients about the perio-cardio connection and the new treatment guidelines.

It's not known exactly how gum disease can lead to heart disease, but researchers have a couple of theories. Inflammation from gum disease increases plaque build-up and may contribute to swelling of arteries. Also, bacteria in the mouth can enter into the blood stream, attach to fatty plaques in the heart blood vessels, possibly paving the way for a heart attack after clot formation. Read more at perio.org.

Dr. El Chaar says that heart disease isn't the only area of concern when it comes to your gums. He notes that researchers have linked gum disease with respiratory conditions, premature births and diabetes from bacteria traveling throughout the body.

If you have symptoms of gum disease (bleeding, tender or receding gums or persistent bad breath), Dr. El Chaar encourages you to not only consult a periodontist, but also consider discussing your symptoms with a primary care physician.