

Grim Gums?

Gum disease can affect the entire body—and it doesn't just go away

If you're not in search of the perfect smile and your teeth don't bother you, why care about oral health? You should. Unfortunately, oral health isn't just about looking good. What's more, it isn't just about your mouth. Gum disease can cause health problems throughout your body, says Dr. Lisa Marie Samaha of Newport News.

"My belief, deep inside, is there is not an organ system in our body that is not affected by the infection of gum disease," says Samaha (D.D.S., F.A.G.D.), who has lectured and written extensively for the general public and medical professionals on this topic. "The oral cavity can be seen as one of the most significant windows to the health and well-being of the entire body."

Although Samaha's greatest joy is creating beautiful smiles, she can't proceed with cosmetic treatment unless the foundation—the bone and gum tissue—is healthy.

First, a definition: gum disease is a bacterial infection of the gums, bone and fiber that connect teeth to the jawbone, Samaha says. Plaque, which is made up of those bacteria and their waste products, forms constantly and sticks to your teeth—that's why you brush and floss. Nearly everyone experiences some form of gum disease during their lifetime. In its most serious stage, gum disease destroys the jawbone and soft tissue that support the teeth, which can cause tooth loss.

"In the field of periodontal medicine, we are astounded by magnitude of impact that

gum disease appears to have on general health," Samaha says.

In brief, Samaha says, well-documented research shows:

- Gum disease can make diabetes worse. In turn, diabetes can make the gum disease worse.
- Gum disease contributes to the development of high blood pressure and heart diseases.
- People with heart murmurs or heart valve defects who have gum disease are at risk for bacterial endocarditis, which is potentially fatal.
- Gum disease can worsen lung diseases, sinus infections and brain abscesses.
- Gum disease is a risk factor for preterm, low birth weight babies.
- Smokers are at a much higher risk for gum disease.
- Patients undergoing organ transplants, chemotherapy and radiation therapy may be adversely affected by gum disease and should be free of gum disease prior to undergoing any of these therapies.

That's just a partial list, and Samaha says she's confident that more research will show links to additional health problems.

More bad news: gum disease is transmissible. Samaha says if she's treating one spouse for gum disease, she prefers to treat the other. Otherwise, they'll just transmit the bacteria back and forth. The bacteria from gum disease can even be transmitted by kissing, blowing on someone's food, or eating and drinking after another person.



Now that you're good and worried, how can you tell if you have gum disease? One sign is gums that bleed when you brush or floss. You are flossing every day, right? Flossing is one of the best ways to help prevent gum disease. But even if your gums don't bleed, you're not safe.

"The sad thing is, many people's gums do not bleed and they still have serious gum disease," Samaha says. "What's even worse are the people who believe that bleeding gums are normal because they've always bled. Bleeding gums are never normal."

Another indicator is bad breath—Samaha prefers to call it strong breath so patients won't be offended.

Other signs of gum disease show up in the dentist's office. If a patient's gums bleed when being probed and cleaned, that's a sign of gum disease. Dentists and hygienists also measure how far a patient's gums have receded and should track it visit to visit, Samaha says. X-rays can show actual bone loss. "The gum disease is very aggressive when bone loss is visible on X-ray, but we see it all the time," Samaha says. "We see it

in 20-year-olds on up."

The good news: the earliest stage of gum disease, gingivitis, can be reversed, she says. Professional evaluation is a good start. Follow up with better oral hygiene—a dental term for using a brush, electric brush, floss, Water Piks™ and other devices.

Samaha's practice recommends a Rota-dent™, which is similar to the device that hygienists use to polish the teeth. The important thing is finding something you, the patient, will use. Even an old-fashioned toothpick can help keep gums healthy.

It may help to think of oral hygiene as a gum massage, Samaha and her hygienists tell their patients. "When we massage the gums, we stimulate blood flow, which brings nutrients to the tissue and at the same time releases toxins."

The third step is to eat right. Eating more fruits and vegetables, taking a nutritional supplement and getting plenty of calcium will help oral health—and make you healthier all over, Samaha says. She and her hygienists, who are skilled in nutritional issues, can tell if their patients are eating right by looking at their mouth and gums. Anything that helps the oral tissues helps the rest of the body.

Recently, nutritional supplements have been developed specifically to treat periodontal disease. They require a prescription. Certain prescription mouthwashes also kill bacteria that cause gum disease. There are many non-surgical ways to treat gum disease, but in the most severe cases, the dentist may need to remove part of the diseased gum. Samaha stresses that gum disease won't cure itself.

