

THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HYGIENE—AN AREA TOO LONG DIVORCED FROM THE HEALTH OF THE REST OF THE BODY

The importance of oral hygiene measures is more than just preventing bad breath and poor cosmetic appearance.

Good oral hygiene prevents dental decay, facial pain, hours spent in the dentist's office, and dollars spent on dental restorations. More importantly, it prevents inflammatory changes from taking place in the gum tissue and supporting bony structures.

The key to good oral hygiene is to prevent plaque from accumulating along the gum line and on teeth surfaces. Plaque represents a sticky, white, biofilm made up of millions of microbes that can destroy dental enamel and trigger gum inflammation.

The first signs of inflammation may be sensitivity when brushing, tissue redness, gum swelling, and/or bleeding when brushing or flossing. These signs are due to inflammation of the gums (gingivitis).

If left untreated, gingivitis can progress. Microbes begin to penetrate into deeper levels of tissue resulting in loss of supporting bone structure (periodontitis).

More importantly, microorganism that have reached deeper layers of tissue may begin to migrate beyond the mouth to other organs including heart, liver, brain, joints, and intestines, as well as proliferating on body implants--pacemakers, artificial joints, and indwelling catheters.

Recent scientific literature is providing evidence that those individuals who have neurodegenerative diseases, including Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's dementia have higher rates of oral-dental pathology. So far, studies have not proven causation, but the evidence is accumulating to strongly suggest this conclusion.

Oral hygiene measures begin with the removal of plaque from the teeth. Plaque forms on the teeth within 24 hours of microbe contact. Once established, plaque matures and hardens into tartar.

Tartar is much more difficult to remove than plaque and requires sharp scraping tools and power washings by the dental hygienist.

Routine home oral hygiene measures are essential for keeping the accumulation of plaque to a minimum. Toothbrushing is a mainstay of prevention. It has been well demonstrated that an oscillating, rechargeable, electronic toothbrush is far superior at removing plaque than a manual, bristle brush. It is also important to brush for a minimum of two minutes or more each time to make sure that all surfaces are cleaned.

Flossing and the use of interdental picks are additional measures to incorporate into a home dental hygiene program. Interdental picks are small, narrow brushes that clear the interdental spaces of debris. They are sold in most drugstores and are found in the dental section.

Flossing or the use of interdental picks should be done before brushing the teeth to remove food particles. Flossing or the use of dental picks permits exposure of larger surface areas to then come in contact with toothpaste and fluoride during subsequent brushing.

Flossing should be done with an up and down motion to clean the surface of each tooth and extend slightly below the gum line. Ideally, flossing should occur after each meal and at bedtime. Even if flossing is skipped after meals, it remains critical to floss before bedtime.

During hours of sleep, salivary flow is decreased and plaque causing microbes produce acids that initiate tooth decay. Medications that are designed to dry secretions like antihistamines also reduce the flow of saliva. The lack of saliva and its ability to rinse and wash microorganisms downstream provides conditions conducive to tooth decay. Any medications that produce symptoms of dry mouth should, therefore, be used under the direction of a care provider.

Those who use a night guard or “dental retainer” or those who wear braces also prevent the salivary flow from reaching teeth providing an environment conducive to dental decay. These individuals must pay particular attention to their dental hygiene measures. It may be advisable that they visit their dental hygienist 3 or 4 times a year for removal of retained plaque and tartar.

In summary, it's worth bearing in mind that the oral cavity is the headwater to the digestive tract and that which occurs in the mouth may be reflected in other parts of the body.