

The Dental and Heart Disease CONNECTION

Dental cavities and gum diseases are bacterial infections that can make heart issues worse.

Infection

The bacteria damage teeth and gums, but they can also get into the bloodstream and travel throughout the body. In the heart, they can infect the inner lining, damage valves, and contribute to other serious complications.

Inflammation

Inflammation helps fight infection by killing harmful germs. Inflammation means “in flames,” which describes how inflamed areas appear: red, hot, and swollen. HOWEVER, chronic or stubborn infections, like cavities and gum disease, create continuous inflammation which can be very harmful! A body continuously “in flames” has a greater risk of developing heart disease, stroke, diabetes, Alzheimer’s Disease, and other problems!

Plaque

There are two types of plaque. Both are harmful.

- » Fatty deposits in blood vessels. This type of plaque contributes to heart disease.
- » Dental plaque is the germ-infested film that can build up on teeth.

Dental plaque hardens over time if not removed through good oral hygiene, forming a sandy-gritty substance (tartar / calculus) which irritates and damages the gums and bone to which teeth attach. That can add to chronic harmful inflammation in the body, including in blood vessels. As inflammation and deposits of fatty plaque cause blood vessels to narrow, blood flow can be impeded or even blocked. This can lead to heart damage and strokes.

Drug Side Effects

- » **Dry Mouth.** A “dry mouth” can be caused by diuretics (water pills) that may be prescribed for congestive heart failure. Inadequate saliva can increase the risk for dental infections. Your dentist may recommend an artificial saliva product, and/or using a fluoride-containing rinse or gel to strengthen teeth against decay.
- » **Blood thinners.** Blood thinners such as Warfarin and Eliquis used to reduce the risk of blood clots or manage irregular heartbeats, can increase bleeding. Because some dental procedures can cause some bleeding, it is important to tell your dentist and hygienist about any medications you are taking, including blood thinners.

How to Prevent Dental Infections

- » **Thorough oral hygiene.** Each tooth has five surfaces where bacteria collect and multiply. Brushing can remove the bacteria from three surfaces (cheek, biting, and tongue sides), and you can use floss or a floss substitute such as Opal Pix for the two side surfaces. Bacteria will begin to reattach to teeth quickly, so it is important to try to brush twice per day and floss once per day, if possible.
- » **Use fluoridated toothpaste.** Fluoride helps protect teeth from the harmful effects of bacteria. Look for products that also have antimicrobial ingredients, such as peroxide and baking soda to help kill the bacteria. Antibacterial rinses may be useful, too.
- » **Denture Care.** The area beneath full and partial dentures can become irritated and inflamed if the appliances are not removed, cleaned, and soaked overnight. If your hands feel weak or tremble, take special care in removing dentures so they don't break if accidentally dropped. One option is to take them out over a sink filled with water. They will splash, but are less likely to break.
- » **Regular Dental Exams.** Cavities and gum infections may not be noticeable at first, but dentists are able to identify them early and treat them before they become a problem. Regular dental exams can detect and treat cavities and gum disease before they become serious. A cleaning may be needed to remove tartar that irritates gums.

Antibiotics before dental appointments?

Patients rarely need to take antibiotics before most dental procedures, but that is something that should be discussed with your dentist and physician. The precaution is usually considered for people with a history of endocarditis, an artificial heart valve or valve repair, or who have had a transplant.

YOUR FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT

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DentalLifeline.org/heartdisease

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