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HEALTH

Regular dental care good for prevention, hygiene



By *Stephen W. Durham*
CONTRIBUTOR

There are some awfully good reasons your dentist asks to schedule a regular cleaning appointment. Some of the very best reasons are not well known.

“Cleaning” might be too modest a term for regular oral hygiene, because it helps in ways much deeper than appearance, even deeper than dental health alone.

Most folks know that a regular hygiene appointment helps prevent cavities, gingivitis, gum disease and bad breath.

But what about the connection between oral health and avoiding chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease? Heredity and risk factors like smoking and unhealthy diet are key, of course.

But research shows that people with gum disease are 40 percent more likely to have a chronic illness too. For example, 91 percent of patients with heart disease have gum disease (periodontitis).

The connections are being researched but they appear to have a lot to do with inflammation. Inflammation around the teeth or gums activates the body's immune system.

Without oral hygiene, that constant immune response has side effects. It appears to weaken the body's ability to

control blood sugar, for example.

While it's vital to brush and floss regularly, those two healthy practices don't do the job by themselves over time. They slow the buildup of dental tartar – the source of inflammation – but they don't stop it altogether.

That's because once tartar forms, even a little bit, it becomes a site for buildup. Its unique surface and consistency are like a foundation for more tartar to form. And once it forms, tartar is too hard and too firmly attached to be removed by brushing and flossing alone.

So that regular hygiene appointment the dentist recommends is really very important. Yes, you save time and money in the long run, but the advantages for your overall health are much bigger and harder to measure than that.

Ask if your dentist offers fluoride varnish. It is relatively new to the U.S., but it's been used since the 1980s in Europe, Canada and Scandinavia.

When fluoride varnish is applied as part of your oral hygiene appointment it helps prevent tooth decay, yes, and it also remineralizes – or hardens – the surface of your teeth.

It's just one more good reason to schedule that “cleaning” appointment.

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