

A healthy smile

Liz Worden
Corpus Christi Caller-Times
April 22, 2012

? Good teeth, gums integral to overall health

Special to the Caller-Times Many people try to eat right, exercise, and even take statin drugs to lower their cholesterol. But they may be overlooking something that could give them a stroke or heart attack.

Many research studies have linked poor dental health to heart attack and stroke, according to Dr. Derek Chang who specializes in general dentistry. This is because periodontal disease causes bacteria to spread from the gums to the blood. This can cause or worsen diseases that affect the body's vascular system. In addition, Chang warns that periodontal disease can worsen problems like asthma and COPD. According to Tilman Richards, who specializes in general, family and cosmetic dentistry, a pregnant mother with periodontal disease will put her fetus at risk of a lower birth weight and a pre-term delivery. Richards said researchers have found a higher rate of pneumonia in people with periodontal disease, and new studies show a link between periodontal disease and pancreatic cancer. There are things about a person's general health that a dentist can know just by looking in the person's mouth. For example, jaundice sometimes shows up first in the floor of the tongue. Also, cancers can be seen in the mouth. When cancer metastasizes, it often goes to the jaw. Then, if the patient gets a panoramic X-ray, the cancerous tissue can be seen. Periodontal disease is affected by diabetes, Chang said. If the patient's blood sugar is poorly controlled due to not taking medications or to consistently having high blood sugar, then the gum disease will cause more irritation than normal and will accelerate at a faster rate than it would in a non-diabetic. Plaque in the mouth of a diabetic is much more irritating than in the mouth of a nondiabetic. It is even worse if the diabetic is not controlling his or her sugars well enough. When a diabetic has major dental work, such as getting a tooth pulled, it will take more time to heal. Soft tissues can tell you a lot about the health of the rest of the body. Chronic dry mouth can be a sign of autoimmune disorders, Chang said. If you have a dry mouth problem, it should probably get checked out. If the teeth are really ground down, then it could be a sign of high stress and/or psychological problems. Richards uses a new technique to treat gum disease - a new, minimally invasive laser gum surgery called LANAP. The healing time is faster and there is less pain with this type of surgery. Richards says 80 percent of the population will get periodontal disease and only 40 percent ever seek treatment.

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