

# Your Dentist Can Save Your Life

**It's not just for a cleaning anymore. Learn about the oral-systemic health link and the impact of a smile on your brain function. Your dentist knows.**

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The days when a patient went to his or her dentist just for a check-up and cleaning are long gone. Curiosity of how an oral infection could possibly be related to the occurrence of disease in other parts of the body goes back centuries. In fact, Willoughby D. Miller published a report *The Human Mouth as a Focus of Infection* in 1891. Fast-forward more than a century to the year 2000 where Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher stressed in his report that bacteria in the mouth can enter systemic circulation and cause disease. Conversely, he noted that there are oral manifestations of systemic diseases and that medications can have adverse oral effects. And, often times, it's your dentist who is the first to detect systemic diseases by noticing changes within the oral cavity.

The investigation into oral-systemic disease connections is a rapidly advancing area of research. Ongoing research clearly shows an epidemiological association of periodontal disease and specific systemic diseases, including cardiovascular disease. What's still unclear is whether periodontal disease is a risk factor for cardiovascular issues, including stroke, or does it contribute casually to heart disease and other systemic diseases such as diabetes, gestational development, kidney and pulmonary diseases?

Periodontal disease is a progressive infection of the gums and their supporting structures caused by bacteria in the

mouth that infects tissue surrounding the tooth, causing inflammation. Usually asymptomatic, periodontal disease affects three out of four Americans in some form and can go undetected for many years if one doesn't visit a dental professional regularly. Symptoms may include bad breath or bad taste that won't go away, gums that are

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tender, red, swollen, receded or painful, and loose teeth and bite changes.

As a result of the information being revealed by ongoing research, periodontal disease treatment helps control overall inflammatory burden, which has a positive impact on systemic health, especially if the patient is at an elevated risk for a more serious systemic problems. This has been a major paradigm shift from the earlier objective of dentists to treat periodontal disease solely to prevent tooth loss. Recent breakthrough findings from leading neurologists show that the brain has the ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. This is called neuroplasticity. It allows the neurons (nerve cells) in the brain to compensate for injury and disease and to adjust their activities

in response to new situations or to changes in their environment. Researchers, including Andrew Newberg, MD and David Perlmutter, MD, have conclusively demonstrated that certain practices help exercise our brain for optimal neural functioning and repair.

You may be asking the question: What does dentistry have to do with this exciting information? Well, the act of smiling is one such practice. Dr. Newberg states that smiling repetitively helps to interrupt mood disorders and strengthens the brain's neural ability to maintain a positive outlook on life. It enhances the neural functioning in specific parts of the brain that are involved

with lowering anxiety and depression, increases social awareness and empathy and improves cognitive and intellectual functioning. It has been shown that even if you fake a smile, other people respond to it with great generosity and kindness. To test this hypothesis, smile at a total stranger while waiting in a line and see how they respond. Then see how their response makes you feel. The results are often nothing short of amazing.

So the next time see your dentist, we hope that you congratulate yourself on taking care of your teeth, gums, oral cavity, smile, systemic health and even your brain function in one important visit. As one can now clearly see, your dentist is way past going for a "cleaning." Your dentist can now save your life. ■