Just for the Health of It

A Surprising Risk Factor for Heart Disease

By now, most of us have heard something about the major risk factors for heart disease. High blood pressure, smoking, overweight, and stress are all issues we should be paying attention to. But recent research shows that we may want to be paying more attention to our teeth and gums as well. There is increasing evidence for a link between gum disease and heart disease. And since early warning signs of heart disease may be less obvious than those of gum problems, it makes sense to look closely at our oral health.

Gum disease is caused by bacteria. Bacteria can lead to infection, and if left untreated, can increase the risk for heart disease. There are several theories being tested right now about why this happens. Is the inflammation process the main culprit as it is in a number of chronic diseases? Does a buildup of plaque on the teeth have any relationship to a buildup of plaque in the arteries even though we are talking about two entirely different kinds of plaque? It appears that the common element may be the bacteria that clumps onto the plaque. Stay tuned.

Keeping teeth and gums healthy begins with general good health habits: don't smoke, exercise, eat a healthy diet, brush and floss daily, and visit your dentist on a regular basis. In addition, if you already have a heart condition, discuss your oral health with your primary care provider.

For more information: www.peio.org/consumer or www.ada.org.