

Floss or Die?

By Dr. Paul Denzler: Denzler Family Dentistry

When Joan Otomo-Corgel first started her lecture series, “Floss or Die” a few years ago it definitely caught the attention of the dental community. Was it a hapless hygienist who had finally polished one too many molars? Or a perturbed periodontist who grafted her last gum. Or maybe a disillusioned dentist that heard her final, “Yes, doc, I will floss my teeth from now on”. Sure, you will, Mr. Jones, sure you will.

Well, while Dr. Otomo-Corgel is a periodontist (the gum and implant dentists), and may at times be perturbed, she was trying to build awareness of something much more important than fresh breath.

Over the last couple of decades, dental research has been building a case for a link between oral health and overall systemic health. For most of modern history the mouth and the rest of the body have been treated as separate parts, one having nothing to do with the other. It’s something that most of us don’t give a second thought to actually. If your hand is swollen, you have a pain in your stomach, or break a leg, you head down to the hospital to see your physician. The same thing happens in your mouth, and you go to a dentist. Don’t even think twice about it, really. But could what goes on in your mouth be more related to the rest of your body than we have grown to believe?

What more recent studies have shown is that there is a definite link between periodontal (gum) disease and systemic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, oral cancer, and upper respiratory infection. Studies are also suggesting pregnant mothers may be at increased risk of delivering low birth-weight or pre-term babies if they have periodontal disease. A theory behind the research suggests that bacteria that are more common in gum disease may be traveling through the blood stream to affect the rest of the body or that the infection they cause around the teeth and gums may be having more wide spread effects than previously thought.

More research has yet to be done and a direct cause-and-effect relationship between periodontal disease and systemic conditions has yet to be established. What we are seeing, however, is that patients suffering from a variety of medical conditions have a higher rate of gum disease and/or bone loss than the general population. Physicians and medical facilities are starting to take notice and so should the general public. Most of the major U.S. universities have ongoing studies, and publications from the Journal of the American Dental Association to the New England Journal of Medicine are raising awareness in the health care community.

So if healthy gums, strong teeth, and fresh breath are not a big enough motivating factor for us to take seriously oral health, perhaps the risk of more serious conditions will be. If taking care of your teeth and gums with a thorough examination, routine preventative care, and good oral hygiene (and yes, flossing is part of that) can move you out of one of the risk groups for stroke, heart disease or protect your unborn child, why not join in? It may not be as simple as, “Floss or die”, but “Healthy mouth, healthy body” may be a more important concept than we ever thought possible.

Dr. Paul Denzler maintains a dental practice in downtown Lincoln, Denzler Family Dentistry. For more information visit his website at www.MyLincolnDentist.com or call him at 916-645-2131.