

# Your Best Smile

GOOD DENTAL HEALTH IS GOOD OVERALL HEALTH

By Lesa Knollenberg

**Robert J. Singer\* never saw it coming. He knew it was important to brush his teeth, but he was inconsistent with dentist appointments and hadn't flossed in years. When years of built-up plaque finally resulted in a diagnosis of gum disease, Singer was offered a minor dental procedure for his periodontitis. He acquiesced and presumed that he paid the price for his poor dental care. But that was just the beginning.**

Two weeks after Singer's surgery, he started to feel tired. The fatigue soon turned to the flu: fever, chills, night sweats and painful joints. He started coughing and couldn't catch his breath. He noticed bleeding under his fingernails and tiny purple spots under his skin. By the time Singer saw his doctor, he was feeling so sick he was admitted to the hospital. Once there, he was told he had endocarditis and his heart was in danger.

Endocarditis is an infection of the heart's valves or inner lining. It is caused when bacteria enters the bloodstream, such as during dental procedures. For those who aren't in good general health, the risk of bacterial infection is much higher, and Singer fell into this unfortunate category. Once in the hospital, he was given an intravenous antibiotic and the damage to his heart was assessed. A week later he was finally released, with serious new health concerns and regret that he never took his oral health seriously.

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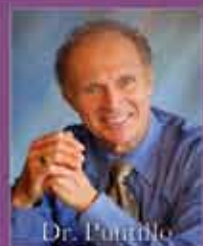
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Most people understand the importance of dental health, yet many don't follow the recommended guidelines for healthy teeth and gums. It's easy to skimp on brushing and flossing and to miss a cleaning or two. But understanding that our general health is dependent on our dental health is the key to

avoiding problems like Singer's.

#### MAKING THE CONNECTION

Dr. Charles Puntillo, a cosmetic and restorative dentist in Burlington, agrees. "Studies have shown your dental health and your overall health are closely related in a number

of ways. For instance, gum disease has been linked to heart disease and diabetes. And, studies are finding possible links between oral health and rheumatoid arthritis, lung conditions and, of course, obesity. Preventive dental care focuses on treatments that stop problems before they start. By being proactive about maintaining healthy teeth, your body and your smile benefit."

Tooth decay, tooth loss, periodontal disease and receding gums are the first — and most obvious — results of poor dental health. But poor oral hygiene can also contribute to other health issues.

**CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE** Research suggests that clogged arteries, strokes and heart disease may be linked to oral bacteria. Periodontitis, a severe form of gum disease, leads to chronic inflammation and may be the cause.

**ENDOCARDITIS** Gum disease and dental procedures that cause a cut in the gum line may allow bacteria to enter the bloodstream. For someone with a weak immune system

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or damaged heart valves, this can lead to infection in the body.

**DIABETES** An individual with diabetes has a reduced resistance to infection, and blood sugar issues affect the gums and the bones that hold the teeth in place.

**OSTEOPOROSIS** Because osteoporosis patients have bones that are weak and brittle, this can also impact the bones of the tooth and jaw.

**ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE** Studies show that tooth loss before the age of 35 may be a risk factor for Alzheimer's.

**PREMATURE BIRTH AND LOW BIRTH-WEIGHT** Gum disease in mothers has been linked to low birthweight in their babies.

Routine dental care can also help diagnose **ACID REFLUX**, says Drs. Christopher J. Hickson, DDS and Thomas J. Geist, DDS, dentists with Lake Geneva Dental Care. "Your dentist can help with the diagnosis if they see an erosive pattern on the enamel

of teeth. This is caused by stomach acids reaching the oral cavity, creating an acidic environment."

Another issue that your dentist can help with is **SNORING AND SLEEP APNEA**. Dental appliances can be used with certain patients to help either issue, especially sleep apnea, which has a laundry list of detrimental health effects.

### KEEP IT CLEAN

It is relatively easy to avoid dental health problems and maintain a dazzling smile with daily care; take care of teeth by watching what you eat and brushing away the plaque that can build up quickly. Hickson and Geist suggest brushing and flossing at least two to three times per day.

"After brushing, one should also scrub their tongue with their toothbrush or use a tongue scraper," they advise. "The tongue is a breeding ground for bacteria that can cause bad breath, gum disease, even cavities. Another helpful hint is to use any of the xylitol-based chewing gums after you eat to reduce the incidence of decay. Rinse with

water after you eat to lower the pH balance in your mouth."

Adds Puntillo: "Limit your consumption of soda, Gatorade, apple and citric juices and other acidic drinks that can erode exposed root surfaces and cause decay and sensitivity."

Get regular checkups. Even if your mouth feels healthy and you have no pain, check-ups every six months are recommended to properly clean the teeth and examine them for potential problems. Dentist and dental hygienists are trained to look for cancer, vitamin deficiencies and other underlying problems that patients can't see. If a dental procedure is suggested, don't delay. Make your teeth a priority and avoid bigger problems later.

"If your dentist gives you any additional instructions, be sure to follow those," says Puntillo. "He or she has your best interest in mind and wants you to keep your beautiful, natural smile for a lifetime!" ▲

*\*Name has been changed*

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