



The Relationship of a **Healthy Mouth** to General Health and Illness

The late former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop championed oral health issues in many ways, including his support of the first ever U.S. surgeon general's report on oral health,¹ and for coining the phrase, "You're not healthy without good oral health."

Clinicians, patients, family members and caregivers have long understood the importance of mouth health to overall health and well-being. This rings true for patients of all ages, but it is especially important when considering the health of vulnerable patients, and older adults in particular. While pathogenic mechanisms are not always well understood, there is a growing body of evidence linking mouth infection to systemic diseases common to older adults including cardiovascular disease, aspiration pneumonia, and diabetes mellitus.²

Cardiovascular Disease and Mouth Health

The American Academy of Periodontology issued a consensus report on the association between periodontitis, a chronic inflammatory disease of the tissues supporting the teeth, and atherosclerotic vascular disease (ASVD).³ The report concluded that there is consistent and strong epidemiologic evidence that periodontal inflammation is associated with increased risk for future cardiovascular disease. However, additional research is needed to better understand the biological mechanisms as well as the impact of periodontal treatment on the prevention of ASVD. A statement from the American Heart Association also acknowledged the link between mouth health and cardiovascular disease and the fact that these diseases share common risk factors

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– Surgeon General
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including cigarette smoking, age, and diabetes mellitus. However, there remain significant gaps in our scientific understanding of the interaction of oral health and ASVD that require additional research.⁴

Aspiration Pneumonia and Mouth Health

A recent systematic review of the literature on daily mouth care and aspiration pneumonia in frail older people showed that the improvement of daily mouth care diminished the risks of developing and dying from aspiration pneumonia.⁵ Routine mouth care including tooth brushing after each meal, cleaning dentures once a day and removing them each night are effective interventions in reducing the incidence of aspiration pneumonia.

Diabetes Mellitus and Mouth Health

A systematic review of the literature on the effect of periodontal disease on diabetes supports significant, adverse effects of periodontal disease on glycemic control, diabetes complications, and the development of type 2 diabetes.⁶ While additional research is needed regarding this relationship as well as all topics examining the association of mouth health to general health, this report concluded that the current evidence suggests that periodontal disease negatively affects diabetes outcomes.

The Importance of Daily Mouth Care in Long-term Care Settings

Regular assessments of the mouth and access to routine dental care, combined with effective daily mouth care can go a long way to enhance the quality of life of residents of long-term care facilities. Patients, family members, caregivers



and health professionals can help older adults stay healthy by assisting with daily mouth care, and by assisting and arranging routine dental care.

A training program for caregivers on daily mouth care called “Overcoming Obstacles to oral Health” is available from the American Dental Association catalog.⁷

An important first step is becoming more knowledgeable about mouth health. The Smiles for Life Oral Health curriculum includes Module 8 on Geriatric Oral Health. This curriculum resource on geriatric oral health was developed by the Group on Oral Health of The Society of Teachers of Family Medicine.⁸ The ADEA Curriculum Resource Center (ADEA CRC) is a state-of-the-art web portal for timely research and the latest dental educational resources and also includes educational modules on geriatric dentistry as well as the topics of mouth and general health.⁹ Additional information can also be found on the American Dental Association website.¹⁰



Sources

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