



Joints Stiff?

Check Your Gums

You may have heard about the link between oral health and overall health. Poor oral health in the form of periodontal (gum) disease has been shown to be a precursor or indicator of cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, and low-birth-weight and/or premature births. And now researchers have found a link between gum disease and yet another physiological condition: rheumatoid arthritis. What's even more interesting is the finding that when the gum disease was treated, patients saw an improvement in the signs and symptoms of their arthritis. Could flossing help alleviate that aching pain in your knee?

A study published last year in the *Journal of Periodontology*, the official publication of the American Academy of Periodontology (AAP), looked at 40 people who had been diagnosed with both moderate-to-severe rheumatoid arthritis and severe periodontal disease. The study's authors found that when the periodontal disease was treated and the infection and inflammation were eliminated, participants saw a reduction in the level of arthritis pain, swollen joints, and degree of morning stiffness.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic inflammatory disease of the joints that affects an estimated 1.3 million Americans, according to the Arthritis Foundation. RA occurs when the body's immune system, which protects us from infection, mistakenly attacks the synovium, the thin membrane that lines the joints. This can result in joint damage, pain, inflammation, loss of function, and disability.

Researchers have looked at the link between periodontal disease and rheumatoid arthritis before. A 2008 study published in the *Journal of Periodontology* found that subjects who suffered from RA were found to have a higher prevalence (eight times more likely, in fact) of periodontal disease.

In the past, the presence of periodontal disease in RA sufferers was often attributed to the loss of manual dexterity, resulting in poor oral hygiene. It was assumed that people with stiff and painful hands, wrists, and fingers were less likely to brush and floss thoroughly. But another study from the *Journal of Periodontology* in 2001 found no difference in the amount of plaque deposits between

test subjects with RA and a control group. (Plaque is the sticky, colorless film that forms on your teeth and contains bacteria that can lead to inflammation of the gums.) These results indicate that the progression of gum disease in the RA subjects was due to factors other than oral hygiene.

Interestingly enough, periodontal disease is also an inflammatory disease, according to the AAP. Inflammation is the body's instinctive reaction to fight off infection, protect against injury, and shield against irritation. Inflammation can be characterized by swelling, redness, heat, and pain around the affected area. While inflammation initially aims to heal the body, chronic inflammation over time can lead to dysfunction of the infected tissues, and, therefore, more severe health complications, says the AAP.

Is it possible that treating one inflammatory disease (periodontal disease) could impact the symptoms in another inflammatory disease (rheumatoid arthritis)? This study points to that; however, more research needs to be done on both diseases before a true causal link is found.

In the meantime, the Massachusetts Dental Society recommends that those suffering from RA adopt the good oral health habits of brushing twice a day and flossing regularly, in addition to visiting the dentist twice a year for checkups and cleanings. After all, healthy gums may be the best natural pain reliever of all.

