

Is there a link between stress and periodontal disease?

h, stress. It seems that no one can escape it these days. You worry about school, work, finances, illness, relationships. You even worry about how much you worry. Not to add to your stress, but you should be aware that all that worrying could have a negative impact on your oral health.

According to an article published last summer in the *Journal of Periodontology*, there is a strong relationship between stress and periodontal disease, also known as gum disease. In addition to stress, other psychological factors, such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness, are linked to an increased likelihood of periodontal disease.

So how does stressing out about your next car payment, for example, lead to gum disease? Researchers believe that the hormone cortisol may be a factor. Cortisol, also known as the "stress hormone," is secreted by the adrenal glands and involved in many functions, including proper glucose metabolism, blood pressure regulation, insulin release for blood sugar maintenance, immune function, and inflammatory response. An earlier study in the *Journal of Periodontology* in July 2006 found that increased levels of cortisol can lead to more destruction of the gums and bone due to periodontal diseases.

Behavioral factors may also come into play. People who are under extreme amounts of stress or suffering from depression may be more likely to disregard their good oral hygiene, such as brushing and flossing regularly. They may even create new behaviors that could negatively impact

their oral health, such as adopting the use of nicotine, alcohol, or drugs, all of which can affect teeth and gums, according to the American Academy of Periodontology.

Your gums aren't the only oral victims of stress. Another oral side effect is teeth grinding, also known as *bruxism*, which often occurs during sleep. According to the American Dental Association, people who grind their teeth may wake up with a headache, earache, or toothache. Their facial muscles may be sore and jaw joints tender. Besides causing discomfort, continuous grinding can eventually damage dental restorations and even loosen teeth. In addition, the pressure from clenching or grinding may cause cracks or fractures in teeth.

If stress seems to be causing you a "pain in the mouth," it may be helpful to find healthy ways to relax, such as listening to music, reading a book, or taking a walk. A regular exercise routine can do wonders for relieving stress, and a balanced diet and plenty of sleep can also be helpful. If you feel that your stress is unmanageable, you should speak to your physician, who may refer you to a mental health professional. And before stress takes a bite out of your oral health, make an appointment to see your dentist.

For more information on your oral health, call the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit www.massdental.org. •

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