



AWARENESS

## WHAT DOES DENTAL HEALTH HAVE TO DO WITH HEART DISEASE?

**International Toothache Day is commemorated on 9 February, and typically an article like this would focus on the blinding pain associated with this affliction, as well as what you can do about it.**

But recent studies have consistently shown the link between unhealthy gums and teeth, and heart disease. This seems like a random correlation, but many medical researchers have found this to be the case.

Dr Robert Shmerling of Harvard Health confirmed the connection between poor dental hygiene and increased risk of cardiovascular disease in an article he wrote in 2018. Penn Medicine, an affiliate of the University of Pennsylvania, corroborates Dr Shmerling's findings and states that "research points to a link between gum disease and inflammation that can precede heart attacks, strokes, and sudden vascular events."

The reasons for this link are not decisive, but the strongest theories so far include (1) the easy access mouth bacteria have to the rest of your body via the digestive tract and (2) the body's immune response (inflammation) being triggered by bacteria originating in the mouth.

These findings are particularly alarming since so many people across the globe have some form of gum disease. The World Health Organization estimates that a whopping 10 per cent of the world's population suffers from severe periodontal (gum) disease. This doesn't even include cavities and mild gum diseases – just think how high that number might be.

But fear not! Penn Medicine provides you with steps to reduce your risk of gum and tooth disease with the following advice:

1. Practice good oral hygiene by brushing and flossing teeth at least twice a day.
2. See a dental hygienist every six months for dental cleanings.
3. Self-inspect your mouth regularly and visit the dentist as soon as you see any of the following symptoms:
  - Red, swollen, or tender gums
  - Bleeding while brushing or when eating hard food
  - Receding gums (when your gums appear to be moving away from your teeth, showing more tooth)
  - Loose or separate teeth
  - If you have persistent bad breath
4. If you smoke, do what you can to stop. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USA) say that smokers have double the risk of developing gum disease, compared to non-smokers. Treatments for gum disease also don't work as well as they could if you are a smoker.

Incidentally, all these healthy gum and tooth measures will also help you avoid a toothache. Another bonus!