



Brush for Your

Maintaining good oral hygiene will protect more than just your smile

By Shereen Joseph

A smile can transcend language and culture, projecting an air of well being and good humour. But it's hard to smile if you're ill, and ill is what you could be if you don't take care of that smile. Good oral health is your best offensive strike against tooth decay and disease.

"When we talk about oral health," says Dr. Curtis

Westersund, a cosmetic dentist in Calgary, "we are talking about three things: healthy teeth, gum tissue, and jaw joints and muscles."

Healthy teeth mean the absence of decay (cavities) and the presence of intact and functioning dental work (fillings, crowns, veneers, root canals). Conversely, an unhealthy mouth can be characterized by broken,

decayed, or painful teeth and dental infections.

"Dental infections were the leading cause of death in prehistoric man," Westersund says. "Thankfully, modern dentistry can prevent these untimely demises."

Healthy gum tissue means the gum tissue and jawbone around the teeth are free of infections, such as gingivitis (inflammation of the gums) and periodontal disease

Your Teeth Heart's Sake

(which is what you get if gingivitis is left untreated or gets worse).

“Most people know that unhealthy gums will lead to loose teeth and even tooth loss,” Westersund says, “but unhealthy gums can have a more sinister effect.” Since gum tissue is well supplied by tiny blood vessels, any infection in this oral region will result in bacteria entering the blood stream.

“Bacteria seeping into your blood stream will cause blood vessel irritation and this in turn will lead to an increased risk of strokes and heart attacks,” he explains.

And there are a host of other complications associated with gum disease.

“It has been shown that people with gum disease have a higher incidence of Alzheimer’s disease, arthritis, and even lower birth weight babies in expectant mothers,” according to Dr. Michael Drance, a Vancouver dentist.

Lastly, a healthy bite will keep your jaw joints and mus-

cles in good condition—in essence, free from tension and strain. An unbalanced bite can lead to head-, ear-, or neck aches that may be accompanied by jaw joint clicking, popping, and locking. Other problems include dizziness, ringing in the ears, pain behind the eyes, numbness (arms or back of the hands), and, of course, tooth wear or chipping caused by grinding teeth.

“Snoring, sleep apnea, weight gain, and hypertension

recede, hence the saying “long in the tooth.” But that’s not the only change that happens over time.

“Our teeth tend to get more yellow and brittle, while our gums decay. With time, we get less resistant to the bacteria that normally resides in the mouth and more susceptible to gum disease,” says Dr. Sam Winter, a cosmetic dentist in Vancouver.

Thankfully, you can do

Post-menopausal women tend to be more susceptible to bone loss.

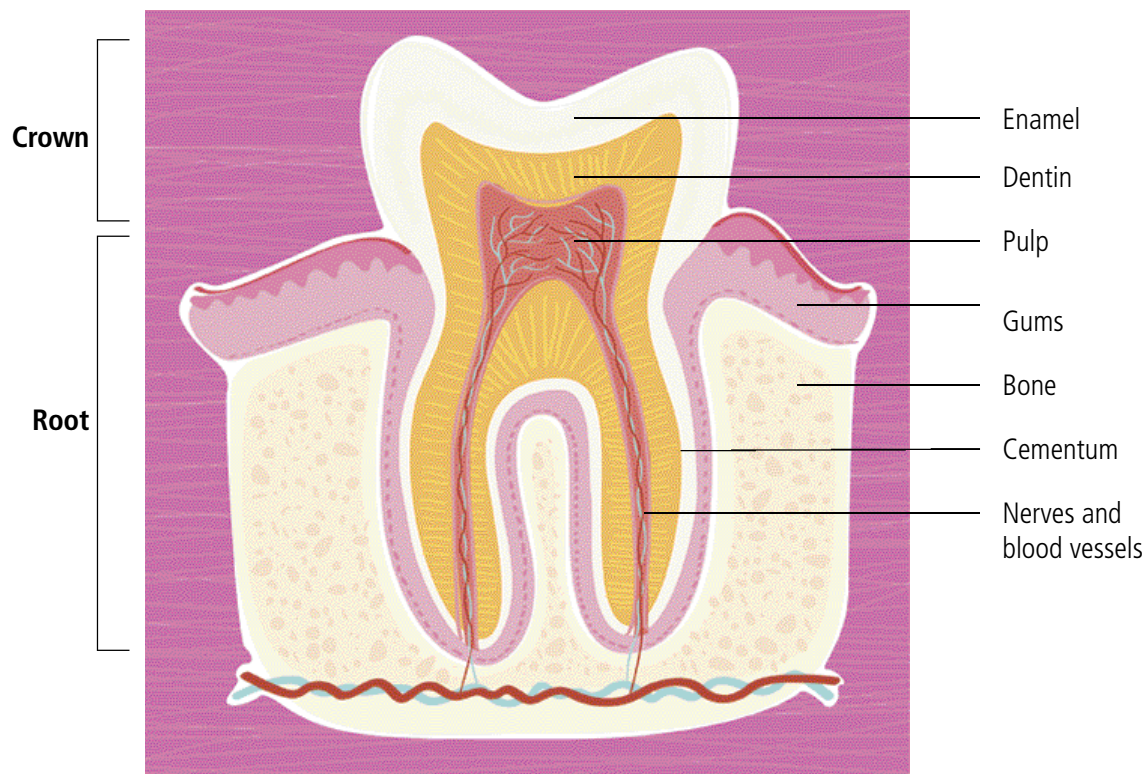
can also be related to an unbalanced bite,” Westersund observes.

Just Two More Minutes

As we age, our gums tend to

something to help fend off gum disease.

“I ask my patients to brush an extra two minutes a day, which doesn’t take much effort. I mean, it’s not like I’m asking for an extra



two hours at the gym,” Winter quips.

When it comes to oral health, women are often left holding the short end of the stick.

“My female patients complain that it isn’t fair that they brush, floss, and generally take better care of their teeth than their husbands, but at the end of the day, their male counterparts have healthier teeth,” Winter says. Why? Well, while gum disease doesn’t discriminate based on age and gender, post-menopausal women especially tend to be more susceptible to bone loss, which can make for more loose teeth.

Sadly, this can interfere with eating, causing some women to shy away from certain foods—acidic foods in particular, such as apple

juice or wine, can cause the roots of teeth to become more sensitive.

“If one is unable to chew because of bad teeth, it can lead to stomach problems and general malnutrition,” Drance observes.

Signs of Trouble

Ninety per cent of the population has gingivitis, but at such a low baseline level that it doesn’t affect their oral health significantly. The early warning signs include bleeding gums, oral pain, and bad breath. Any one of these complications signifies a higher risk of tooth decay.

“If your gums bleed when you brush,” Winter advises, “make an appointment with your dentist as soon as possible.”

If you’ve had any previous

dental work done, be warned that this can precipitate oral health problems.

“Tooth decay under old dental work can lead to a sneak attack by bacteria as old crowns and fillings give bacteria places to hide from your toothbrush,” Westersund explains. The decay in this case occurs closer to the live part of the tooth, where the nerves lie. In these instances, most people experience no pain until it is too late and a root canal is needed.

Saliva loss with age can also compound any oral health problems. “The saliva we produce helps fight gum disease, but as we age, our mouths become drier. This allows bacteria to reproduce more quickly,” Westersund says.

“The loss of saliva can

result in an increase in cavities, especially on the root surfaces,” Drance adds.

Gingivitis can carry more sinister health risks.

“Gingivitis produces inflammation in the mouth and the products of this

gum disease, some of which can be very aggressive.”

Teeth at Risk

When the bone, ligaments, and gum tissue surrounding the tooth and its root have

Gingivitis can carry health risks more sinister than cavities.

inflammation can lead to heart disease,” Winter cautions. And, says Drance, “There are also many oral cancers associated with

been affected by bacterial infection, you have periodontal disease.

“If significant amounts of bone are lost, that’s when

teeth can get loose and need extracting,” Drance says.

Periodontal disease is also a source of chronic inflammation in the body due to bacterial infection. Bacteria get into the blood stream, then travel throughout the body and settle on arterial plaque, causing irritation in the blood vessels. This process can ultimately lead to heart attacks and strokes.

“Periodontal disease will also affect the action of insulin in diabetics,” Westersund says, “and these patients will require more of the drug to stabilize blood sugars.”

Bad Bite?

As teeth wear with the passing of time, the chin migrates towards the nose. The upper lip gets thinner, while the lower lip protrudes more, and creases develop in the line between the corner of the nose and the corner of the mouth. In addition, jowls form on the line of the jaw. “All of this is a direct result of an aging bite,” Westersund says.

An unbalanced bite—the result of the teeth not being properly aligned in the mouth—tends to become more of an issue with age. This is because jaws become less resilient to insult with time.

“Where an unbalanced bite may not affect a young teenager or someone in their early 20s, time and wear will catch up with jaw joints and muscles eventually,” Westersund observes. Ultimately, this will mani-

Smoking and Oral Health

Smoking creates two main areas of concern in the mouth. First, the loss of bone that supports the tooth happens a lot more quickly in smokers. Second, smoking is a significant factor in the development of mouth cancers.

Smoking magnifies the effect of the bacteria that cause gum disease by drying the mouth and changing the distri-

bution of blood vessels in the tissue found in the oral cavity. "This means that smokers are five times more at risk for gum disease," says Dr. Curtis Westersund, a Calgary cosmetic dentist. They are more likely to lose the important bone surrounding the tooth and so will lose their teeth more quickly.

And because blood vessels become more constricted with

smoking, people who smoke tend not to notice any underlying gum infection until a much later stage, when the disease is more severe. "Any disease that develops is usually masked, as the infection responses that typically occur in non-smokers—such as bleeding—are dampened in smokers," explains Dr. Sam Winter, a cosmetic dentist in Vancouver.

fest in specific symptoms. "Here is where gender makes a difference. Women will have more pain issues with a bad bite. Headaches, fibromyalgia, clicking jaw joints, and sore neck and facial muscles seem to be directly related to the presence of estrogen."

Men are more likely to experience teeth chipping.

Muscle pain is often a direct result of the strain caused by biting and clenching with unbalanced teeth. "This pain can be debilitating, constant, and so extreme that some of my patients have even considered suicide," Westersund says. Fortunately, the problem can be resolved; ask your dentist.

Take Care of Yourself

Oral hygiene is the only way to reduce the risk of gingivitis and periodontal disease. Good oral care should include not only brushing and flossing, but also tongue scraping—the tongue is a

huge source of bacteria in the mouth—and the use of an antimicrobial mouth wash, Drance says.

"Good oral upkeep is simply a part of general

body hygiene," Winter says. "People should pay the same attention to cleaning their teeth as they do to the maintenance of their hair and skin." ■