

Healthy You

FAST FACTS FOR YOUR HEALTH

Q&A with Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin: A Closer Look at the Oral Health-Heart Disease Connection

As medical researchers continue to make discoveries, we've learned that the health of your teeth is often connected to your overall health — including your heart. But the association between oral health and heart health still isn't fully understood.

To offer some clarity on this challenging subject, we reached out to Dr. Jeffrey Chaffin, Delta Dental of Iowa's Vice-President and Dental Director for his thoughts on what you need to know about oral health and heart health, along with how you can advocate for yourself at your next dentist and doctor visit.

Q: What's the connection between oral health and heart disease?

Dr. Chaffin: Taking care of your teeth won't necessarily prevent heart disease. While we need more research and need more understanding, there is a relationship between poor oral health and heart disease.

For example, gum disease is associated with increased risk of developing heart disease. Poor oral health can increase the risk of bacterial infections in those with diseased heart valves, especially artificial valves. There is also a strong connection between diabetes and heart disease. People who have diabetes and are being treated for gum disease may receive some added heart benefits as a result of controlling gum disease.

Q: What good oral hygiene habits should patients practice to improve their heart health?

Dr. Chaffin: Although heart disease can't be prevented by oral health alone, it's important to take care of your teeth and gums with these four tips:

1. Brush your teeth twice a day.
2. Floss daily.
3. Schedule twice yearly dental checkups. Getting on a regular preventive schedule will ensure your dentist catches any potential problems early.
4. Control certain harmful lifestyle factors, such as alcohol and tobacco use and obesity.

Q: Are there specific oral health problems or "red flags" that are indicative of an underlying heart condition? Do these problems warrant an immediate call to a dentist or physician?

Dr. Chaffin: If a person feels clammy, has chest pain with pain radiating to the left arm or both arms — those are a few red flags of a person having a cardiac event that warrants immediate medical attention.

There are other signs of heart disease that can be red flags as well, but they do not require urgent medical attention. Shortness of breath, fatigue, swelling of the ankles and feet are just a few examples of signs and symptoms that can be related to heart disease. If you have these symptoms, call your doctor to determine your next steps.

Q: What advice do you have to help patients talk to their dentist about how their oral health is linked to their medical health? Any conversation starters to help patients coordinate care between dentist and physician?

Dr. Chaffin: Openness about your health history is extremely important. This means that when you see your dentist, you should give a complete health history and any concerns you have about your overall health — don't limit the conversation to only concerns about your teeth and mouth. This will allow your dentist to develop a treatment plan with you as a whole person in mind. The same goes for when you see your personal doctor — you should share any oral health concerns with the physician as well.

Calcium Is Great, But You Need Vitamin D, Too

Your teeth are bones, and what nutrient helps feed your bones above any other? Calcium! Most of us know that our bones need calcium to grow and rebuild, but did you know that calcium works best with vitamin D?

Vitamin D supports the calcium absorption process — that is, it helps your bones soak up calcium to be strong and healthy. If you don't have enough vitamin D in your system, which your doctor may refer to as a vitamin D deficiency, your body could be absorbing only a fraction of the calcium you're consuming — as little as 1/3 of it.

How do you get vitamin D? One simple way is to get it by spending a 10-30 minutes in the midday sun a few times a week. If you are in the sun longer than 30 minutes, use sunscreen to prevent sunburn.

Sun breaks are a great solution for the summer, but what do you do in the dead of a cold Iowa winter? Eating vitamin D-rich foods and using a supplement will ensure your body has enough of this important nutrient — even if sitting the sun isn't an option.

How to Get Vitamin D in Your Diet

Some vitamins and nutrients are found naturally in lots of foods and beverages — vitamin D is not one of those nutrients. Vitamin D is found in a short list of grocery items. The biggest vitamin D dietary powerhouses include:

- Vitamin D-fortified milk
- Vitamin D-fortified orange juice
- Mushrooms
- Egg yolks
- Fatty fish (such as tuna, sardines, salmon and mackerel)

If you don't like to eat those foods, you can incorporate a vitamin D supplement into your daily routine. But before you do that, talk to your doctor about the amount you should take. Taking too high a vitamin D supplement dose can be unsafe, so it's important your doctor knows what you're taking and how much.

How Much Vitamin D Should You Get Each Day?

According to Harvard health experts, people taking a vitamin D supplement likely do not need more than 600-800 IU per day of vitamin D. If you have a bone condition (such as osteoporosis) or a disorder that prevents you from absorbing calcium or vitamin D properly,

Bone Health Is Oral Health, Too

It's easy to forget that eating for bone health also helps your oral health — your teeth are bones, after all! During the winter months, it's especially important to feed your bones with vitamin D-rich foods.

If you start a new supplement, give your doctor a call to ensure it's the right move for you, and don't forget to tell your dentist at your next visit, too. Keeping your healthcare providers informed of everything you're taking — not just medications but supplements as well — is one of the best ways you can advocate for your own health.

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