



# How Your Gums Affect Your Heart

**S**CIENTISTS ARE increasingly observing a connection between oral health and heart conditions. In a study published in the *International Journal of Cardiology*, researchers looked at two groups of patients—those who had suffered a recent heart attack and a control group—and found that the heart patients had noticeably worse oral health compared to the controls. This doesn't prove that bad teeth and gums *caused* the heart attacks, but it does indicate an association between the two.

How might oral health affect the heart? In gingivitis, the milder

form of gum disease, infection leads to chronic inflammation—gums are swollen, red, and sometimes bleeding. In periodontitis, the more severe form, the infection affects the bones that support the teeth, leading to tooth loss. In both cases, disease is caused by an accumulation of bacteria, or plaque, in the gums. These organisms release toxins that can circulate around the body.

In particular, the body's arterial system may be affected. Multiple studies, including a recent report in the *Journal of Clinical Periodontology*, display a startling correlation: The more severe the gum disease, the thicker and harder the walls of the arteries. This is true even for young, healthy adults with no other symptoms of heart problems. Narrowing

of the arteries (or atherosclerosis) is a key component of heart disease.

But gum disease threatens more than your heart. In theory, the toxins in plaque can cause harm wherever they go. In fact, scientists are finding more and more links between oral health and conditions such as diabetes, kidney disease, preterm labor, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's disease, and even certain types of cancer.

With deep cleaning and removal of bacterial buildup, gum disease can

be reversed—if it's caught in the early stages. The intriguing question is whether tending to problems of the teeth and gums will benefit patients with nar-

rowing of the arteries.

A 2007 report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* noted that patients in an intensive six-month program to treat gum disease emerged not only with healthier gums but with improved endothelial function—a reference to the lining of the blood vessels.

Too many of us neglect our gums and teeth. According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, more than 8% of Americans aged 20 to 64 have periodontal disease. The American Academy of Periodontology puts the number even higher—one in three adults over 30. Good oral health will obviously help you avoid tooth loss. And who knows? It may also be the way to a healthy heart.

**There's a link between oral bacteria and hardening of the arteries.**