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The Value of Dental Health – Not Just a Pretty Smile!

Some of you reading this week's ReFresh are disciplined when it comes to oral health – well done! Good dental hygiene is an important step towards maintaining overall health and well-being.

Some of us may not prioritize a visit to the dentist. If you are in this group – read on!

What Puts our Oral Health at Risk?

We are better equipped to keep our mouths healthy if we know the risk factors that may lead to illness. Common oral health risk factors include:

- **Age:** Not much we can do about this!
- **Diabetes:** This condition puts gums at risk due to the body's lower immunity.
- **Osteoporosis:** This is a bone-weakening disease that is tied to periodontal bone loss and tooth loss.
- **Alzheimer's:** Oral health worsens as the Alzheimer's disease progresses.
- **Some medications:** Medications such as decongestants, antihistamines, painkillers, diuretics, and antidepressants can reduce saliva flow. Saliva helps us wash away food and neutralizes acids produced by bacteria in the mouth.
- **Stress and anxiety:** Those struggling with stress often grind their teeth, and can also be at risk of reduced immunity which increases their chances of gum disease.
- **Sleep apnea:** This condition results in dry mouth which may lead to tooth decay, mouth sores, gum inflammation, and periodontal disease.
- **Unhealthy diet:** Your body, including your gums and teeth, need the right nutrients. As we know, diets high in sugar can affect our oral health.
- **Alcohol and smoking, including smokeless tobacco and vaping:** Daily use of alcohol, smoking and/or vaping over time can lead to dry mouth, inflammation, enamel damage, staining, and a risk of oral cancer.
- **HIV/AIDS:** Oral problems, such as painful mucosal lesions, are common in people who have HIV/AIDS.
- **Smoking/ingesting cannabis**

- **Oral piercings/jewelry**
- **Injuries:** Remember to always wear your mouth guard when playing at-risk sports!

A further notable risk is when we do not take proper and regular care of our teeth and gums. As with other health conditions, it is important to practice preventative behaviours, watch for early signs of problems, and address oral health issues as soon as possible to stop or reduce any negative effects on your body.

How Does Poor Oral Health Impact Overall Well-being?

An unhealthy buildup of bacteria in your mouth makes your gums prone to infection. Periodontal (gum) disease is an infection of the tissues that hold teeth in place. Oral bacteria and the inflammation associated with gum disease may enter your bloodstream, which can increase your risk of other health problems. Here is how poor oral health can impact our well-being:

- **Edentulism:** Tooth loss makes chewing more difficult and can lead to poor nutrition.
- **Oral cancer:** This risk is particularly linked to tobacco and alcohol use.
- **Cardiovascular disease:** Although the connection is not fully understood, some research suggests that heart disease, clogged arteries, and stroke might be linked to the inflammation and infections that oral bacteria can cause.
- **Respiratory disease:** Dental infections have been associated with a higher risk of pneumonia.
- **Endocarditis:** This infection of the inner lining of your heart chambers or valves (endocardium) typically occurs when bacteria or other germs from another part of your body, such as your mouth, spread through your bloodstream and attach to certain areas in your heart.
- **Diabetes:** Inflammation in the body, including your gums, can lead to higher blood sugar levels, which contributes to a higher risk of diabetes.
- **Preterm babies:** Gum disease has been associated with a higher risk of preterm and low-birthweight babies.

Tips (or Reminders) of How to Maintain Oral Health

- **Brush your teeth** for 2 to 3 minutes, twice a day, using a soft-bristled brush and fluoride toothpaste. This removes food and plaque and keeps your mouth clean and free of bad bacteria.
- **Replace your toothbrush every three to four months**, or sooner if bristles are splayed or worn.
- **Swish with a mouthwash once a day** to reduce odour-causing bacteria. Avoid mouthwashes with alcohol as these can further dry and damage sensitive tissues.
- **Wait 30 minutes after eating before you brush** as this will minimize any potential damaging of the enamel.
- **Floss** at least once a day, or after snacking. Floss reaches those places your toothbrush cannot reach and removes bacteria that causes bad breath as well as plaque that causes gum disease.
- **Brush or scrape your tongue** to remove any other food residue and keep breath fresh.
- **Avoid sugary drinks** including both juices and pop – stick with water, which also keeps your mouth hydrated, neutralizes any leftover acid in your mouth, and washes away debris.

- **Eat healthy:** A nutritious diet is good for both dental and overall health. You need proper nutrients for healthy teeth and gums. And, of course, try to reduce your sugar intake.
- **Reduce alcohol and try to quit smoking or vaping.**
- **Schedule regular dental checkups and cleanings.**

[Here is a list](#) of products that have oral benefits validated by the Canadian Dental Association:

Keep Smiling!

The great thing about oral health is that most conditions are largely preventable and treatable in their early stages. Oral health allows you to speak, smell, touch, taste, and communicate with confidence, and without pain and discomfort. It is an important component of your overall well-being routine to prevent disease.

Sources:

https://www.cda-adc.ca/en/oral_health/index.asp#healthRisk

<https://www.fdiworldddental.org/>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/dental/art-20047475>

<https://www.oda.ca/>

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/sleep-apnea-and-oral-health-4587690>

<https://diabetes.org/about-diabetes/complications/oral-gum-disease>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

Member Health & Well-Being, Director

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpypa.bc.ca.