

Brush, floss and see your dentist

Gum disease from poor oral hygiene can impact other body parts

Kent Splaingard, DMD, recalls decades ago when he learned his mother had stage three gum disease. Her dental providers told her that dentures were likely in a few years.

But after thirty years of treating his mother, Dr. Splaingard says she lost just one tooth.

"I always point it out here," Dr. Splaingard says, gesturing to where the tooth was. "I remember taking that tooth out thinking, 'What a failure.' But I really look back at it and say, 'What a success.' Mom had her teeth all her life."

It's a prime example of how therapeutic dental treatment can reverse the effects of gum disease. And it's something he sees weekly with patients at OSF HealthCare in Alton, Illinois. Dr. Splaingard is a retired private practice dentist and an instructor at Lewis and Clark Community College in nearby Godfrey. He and his students regularly see OSF patients who need extra dental attention.

It's important work, Dr. Splaingard says, because our body functions as a whole. Advanced gum disease will likely make other medical conditions worse.

"The mouth is like a picture window into the body's health," he says.

Gum disease basics

Dr. Splaingard says gum disease is a bacterial infection caused by poor oral hygiene. The bacteria embed into the gum tissue, and that typically results in a low-grade chronic infection (in other words, a problem over a longer period). Left untreated, your gums will constantly be red (not the normal pink), swollen and sore. Bleeding is possible, too.

"You see a lot of debris on the teeth. You may see a film of bacteria. You also see a white-ish coating on the soft tissue," Dr. Splaingard adds.

"You also see the social and economic problems with the people who can't chew properly. The poor nutrition they may be getting," he adds.

Treatment for gum disease is a combination of thorough cleaning by a dental professional, treatments that stop bacteria from reproducing and antibiotic medication. In severe cases, a dental specialist may perform surgery. That could involve pulling some or all of a person's teeth.

Prevention

Dr. Splaingard says gum disease can be passed down genetically, but general prevention goes back to what dentists have told you since you were a kid.

- Brush and floss regularly. The American Dental Association recommends brushing twice per day and flossing once per day. If you have questions about frequency, talk to your dentist.
- See a dentist regularly. Twice per year is a good starting point, but some people who need extra attention could go four times per year.
- In between those appointments, watch your teeth and gums and let your dentist know if something doesn't seem right.

"It's education, motivation and self-treatment," Dr. Splaingard says.

Learn more

Read more about oral health on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).